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VISIT…

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The Truth Is Waiting ...

Apparently, even the vast reaches of space hold no more secrets for the modern science fiction fan.

The more time I spend upon your planet, the more I am amazed to see how much you earthlings have already discovered about our kind.

You are surprised.

Let me remind you therefore, about the old saw concerning the infinite number of monkeys. (In my studies of your planet, I have identified "saw" as something with a great many teeth, which in this instance applies perfectly.) According to this story, should you put an infinite number of monkeys in a room with an infinite number of typewriters, they will eventually type out the complete works of Shakespeare. (It occurs to me that they might also type out a great many other things, including Stephen King's grocery lists — tentative publication set for next July — the entire tax code of the Internal Revenue Service, and at least half of a Robert Jordan novel. But I digress.)

Well, in the very same way as all those monkeys in that very large room, an infinite number of television shows will indeed betray a certain similarity to the truly alien awaiting you beyond your planetary boundaries.

Things have not always been this open. I am reminded how my predecessors suppressed the 1956 film *Kreegar, Monster from the Infinite*, which, with the giant squid suit, the opera-singing jumping beans, and the beautiful blonde scientist named Gretchen, was just a bit too close to the Truth.

(A film called *Kreegar, Monster from the Infinite*? you ask. Never heard of it!

My point exactly. But I digress again.)

Now, however, it would be useless for alien forces to meddle in such things. There is too much science fiction to hold anything back ever again, with hundreds of hours of television and movies produced every year, not to mention such archaic forms as "books" and "magazines."

Of course, not everything reported in media science fiction will be accurate. The average interstellar space station is nowhere near as interesting as the one on your TV. The holosuites never have Sherlock Holmes programs. The Leonardo DaVinci programs, on the other hand, never get used.

On the other hand, TV has managed to capture the "real" alien in a number of instances, and millions have witnessed through the "fiction" of television certain realities of what TV likes to refer to as "the beyond."

For example:

(1) Slime is, indeed, everywhere.

(2) Real aliens don't see quite so many flashlight scenes, although the lights they do use are very, very bright.

(3) Cute aliens will readily shill for insurance companies if the money is good enough.

You are surprised? Don't be. The inaccuracies still far outnumber those truths you see in televised science fiction, but such a statement might also carry over to TV as a whole. Who, for a minute, believes in Pamela Anderson Lee? Or Jerry Springer? Not that they both haven't been involved with a few aliens themselves. But that's another editorial.

So the truth is out there, as somebody or other said. But how do you, the viewer, find a way to separate fact from falsehood?

I thought you'd never ask.

To get a proper view of life elsewhere in the galaxy, it is important that the discerning TV watcher simply pick and choose the most likely among the many options available. Ah, you say. Of course! Therefore it should come as no surprise that alien life is exactly like a combination of the *X-Files*, *Sliders*, *Stargate*, *ALF*, *Little House on the Prairie*, *Babylon 5*, and that infomercial you watched that night you couldn't sleep.

And why am I telling you this? Pure self-interest, I assure you. The fact that everyone on Earth has this new information certainly makes my task easier. Should those of your planet ever qualify to be inducted into the vast Galactic Union (after, of course, you have reached a satisfactory level of civilization and scientific achievement, not to mention amassing sufficient brownie points) you will have no shock of the new, because you will have seen it all before. Even the Galactic Union itself will seem familiar, featuring aspects of the United Nations, K-Mart on a Saturday afternoon, and waiting in line for the "Pirates of the Caribbean" ride with a three-year-old who needs to go to the bathroom.

Therefore, I am prepared to give you a few more hints about the link between televised science fiction and the Truth, so that you might be better prepared, should the time ever come for the aliens to truly reveal themselves (as opposed to revealing themselves in a bimonthly magazine column). Therefore, even though I might be overstepping my bounds as an "observer," I give you a short list of certain programs that best exemplify alien thought. Just don't tell my superiors.

The truth is indeed waiting for you, as all is revealed about alien attitudes concerning family (*My Favorite Martian*), business practices (*Poltergeist: The Legacy*), personal hygiene (*Baywatch Nights*), funeral rites (*Third Rock from the Sun*), culinary habits (actually, sort of a cross between *The Burning Zone* and *Land of the Giants*) and religion (That's right. You guessed it. *My Mother the Car*).

There! Study and learn, and you will be prepared. Keep watching the tube.

And then, keep watching the skies!❑

Day the First, Day the Last

By Dan Persons

Art by David LeClerc

And I am born.

They must not have expected consciousness this go 'round — they're over on the other side of the room, eyes glued to their monitors, hands busy at their keyboards. Milos is the first to notice; she turns, heads for the coffee machine, stops halfway as she realizes I am tracking her. Her hand flutters once at her side, subliminal signal of a mind in conflict, trapped between equally strong impulses to flee, defend, and laugh out loud.

I try to smile, but the musculature is wrong and I'm not sure if the expression displayed is at all close. I do manage to press a foredigit to what passes for lips and wink: *Let's take 'em by surprise, okay?*

She has no sense of humor: "Uh ... Uh, guys?"

"Ya gotta see this, Anne," Dr. Harst replies. "The figures are really holding together this time."

"*You* gotta see *this*."

It's a second before the urgency of her tone penetrates their consciousnesses. There's a symphony-like grace to the next few seconds, as her colleagues struggle to shift attentions from the hypnotic dazzle of their displays to the reality of the woman's summons. Finally, Harst and Kuhndra follow Milos's gaze, tracking it all the way to my sentient form.

I'm tempted to wave, but think maybe that, under the circumstances, it would seem flip. In fact, any response I can think of to this situation seems inappropriate. I'm taking the whole thing too lightly — I should have some sense of the gravity of the moment, maybe even some anxiety or fear. Instead, a pleasant sort of serenity buoys me, accompanied, strangely, by a tantalizing horniness — a curious state for my genderless body.

As expected, Dr. Harst rises from his seat first. His glance is fixed to mine, and his feet shuffle in that automatic, preoccupied gait he exhibits when his mind is turning over important matters. Kuhndra follows, Milos brings up the rear — vanguard willingly yielding position to her seniors. They stand in a line before me, none of them yet willing to claim the lead.

They don't speak. I'm enjoying the moment — the way they stand, mouths slightly agape, waiting as if history will spin this event out of its own accord. It isn't that easy, friends, sorry. I'd laugh, but my conscience — still consumed with the importance of this moment — stops me.

Instead, I rise on my three legs and tower over them as I steady myself on the table. Flexing my neck extension, I lower my head, meeting their eye-levels. I regard them one by one, and once more try on that rictus that passes so poorly for a grin. "Okay," I say, my voice startlingly thin and frail, "which one of you bitches is my mother?"

Forty-five minutes into it, I grow bored with the questioning. I hoist myself up, stretch to drive the stiffness from my limbs, and leap off the table. As a unit, they jump backward as I hit the floor. "Now, wait a minute ..." Kuhndra cries.

My feet scrabble against the tiles, and I struggle for a few seconds before gaining balance. The tangle of circuitry rigged to my back rocks precariously, then settles into its niche. "Well, I guess these can't work in all environments," I say as I tilt a limb and look at the toughened leather of a foot-pad. "They'll be great for dirt surfaces, or rock. Anything smooth, I'll probably land flat on my ass."

"Trip," says Harst, "this may not be advisable."

I look at him. I've startled him worse than I anticipated — I can see the blood drain from his face, taste an edge of panic to his breath. Strange. "Not advisable?"

"First time," he replies, softly. "You may be pushing things too fast."

"You think I shouldn't stand?"

"I suggest that you first let us do a system audit. If something should blow ..."

"I feel fine."

"You think you feel fine. What if something goes wrong? *Seriously* wrong?"

"You'd track down the problem and fix it in the next model."

Behind Harst, Milos snorts. "That presumes they'll let us grow another."

"She's right," Harst says. "It was hard enough convincing the board to clear one prototype. If anything goes wrong, they're just as likely to trash the entire project."

He's definitely frightened now. Frightened for his career, frightened for the project. Frightened for me? Maybe. A part of me can't ignore his concerns; another part suspects the real reasons behind them.

"Caution would be smart," I say, settling my

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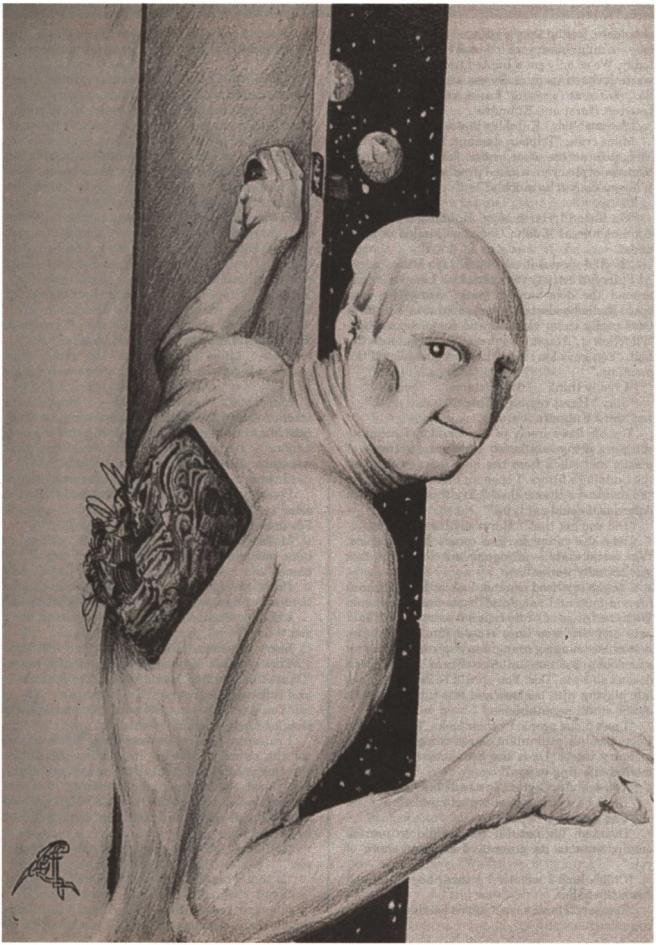

shoulders, feeling the jury-rigged circuitry pack as only a mild hindrance. "I don't feel too smart today. We've only got a limited time; we can either waste it chatting, or really see what this baby can do." Without waiting for a reply, I squeeze between Harst and Kuhndra.

"Sonuvabitch," Kuhndra hisses.

Milos cries, "Tripper, dammit, this is not ..."

I stop at the door, spin, face my creators. "Gentlepeople, you wanted free will, you got it. Will you deny it so quickly?"

Pause.

"Go ahead," Harst says. Kuhndra and Milos stare at him as if John Gacy had landed in their midst.

"So glad we put it to a vote," says Milos.

Flurry of activity to my back as I snake a digit around the door-handle, yank, swing the door open. Radio headsets are tossed around, Kuhndra tries to dig out a vid-unit and some clean chips. "I'll follow it," Harst is saying as I step out into the hall. "You guys stay here, keep on-line, watch the monitors."

"I really think ..." Milos starts.

"*Stay*," Harst replies. "*Watch*."

"Shit," Kuhndra mutters.

The air flows freely in the corridor. I hear the soft purr of the ventilation system, taste traces of plastic and silica from the air's journey through the building's filters. I open an intercom line, say, "You want a systems check? Try this: our home is delicious. I could eat it up."

"Did you get that?" Harst says to my back.

Over the intercom line comes Milos's voice: "Vid, audio, stats — all signals are clear. Shit, this shit actually works."

I snake my head around, look at Harst behind his vid-unit and tangle of boom-mike/earphone. With the fringe of white hair surrounding his bald pate and the deep lines etched into his face, he resembles an aging orangutan aspiring to a correspondent's position on *NewsWorld Live!* "Tech doesn't suit you, Doc. You should be in a basement lab, playing with beakers and test-tubes, cackling as the storm rages outside."

"Don't judge people by their looks, Tripper," the Doctor replies, still intent on recording his supplementary video. "Or is the Frankenstein scenario more comforting to you?"

"You tell me, Doctor. You built me."

"Don't be evasive. I can't read minds."

"Can't you?"

"Granted, it's natural for a child to ascribe omnipotence to its parents. I expected more of you."

"Child, hm? I wonder." I turn, begin to head down the hall.

"Tripper," Harst says, "you're heading towards reception."

"Think I can't cope with open spaces?"

"I think that the people there may not be ready for you."

"Let's find out." I continue walking, hear Harst's grunt, hear him follow.

"We programmed the thing to explore," Kuhndra's voice crackles on the 'com. "Little bastard's fixated now."

"Not the half of it," Harst mutters, but I'm not sure the mike picked it up, or was meant to.

The corridor widens, turning into the bright, sun-drenched expanse of GeneDatum Incorporated's reception area. The place is deserted, save for a guard at the front door and Larry McTeague, who sits behind the reception desk, looking bored. Quietly, I walk up behind him, reach out a forediglit, and brush it against his arm. As he turns, I say, "Hi. I'm Tripper, or Tri-Pedal Extravehicular Remote to my friends. Give us a kiss."

Larry, with a shameful absence of courtesy, flies backwards out of his seat. "*Jesus!*"

"Nice," Milos grouses over the radio. "I've always wondered what the corp's severance policy is."

McTeague's heartbeat races — I hear it as a staccato accompaniment to the room's ambient rush of air. Carefully — so as not to panic the poor human — I approach him. "Tell me, Larry, what were your first thoughts upon seeing me?"

"I think I'm going to be sick," Larry replies.

I look at Harst. "Hm. Well, it's a good thing the solar system is otherwise unoccupied. It appears I'd suck at first-contact work."

McTeague is catching his breath, daring to take one step closer. "How does it know my name?"

Harst shrugs apologetically. "We've used portions of our own memory patterns in the program."

I try my smile on the guy. "Very useful, don't you think?"

Larry blanches. "Crap."

The muscles around Harst's mouth tense. "Okay, this was fine. Come back to the lab now."

I turn to him. "So soon?"

"You've had your adventure; you nearly stopped Larry's heart; it's enough."

I raise my eye-level to meet his. "Look, you've got the twins monitoring my direct line, you're shooting your supplemental vid, you've got, at the very least, double-redundant records of every nanosecond of my existence. What more are you going to learn in a lab that you can't find out here?"

"It'll keep you from scaring the shit out of people."

"Is that what you're worried about?"

"Yes."

For some reason, that feels wrong. But if that's the way he wants to play it: "Tell you what: I'll be

good, okay? It isn't as if people don't know what you've been doing. If I cut the sneaking-up, we should all cope. Deal?"

He doesn't answer. He's looking genuinely ill, caught between caution and desire. This isn't scientific dispassion — he's taking this hard.

Kuhndra's voice crackles on the line: "Joe, you're not going to ..."

I try to put on my most sympathetic look — likely this comes out a striking imitation of a dromedary with indigestion. "C'mon," I say. "You're going to learn more about me in a real environment than you ever would holding me prisoner in the lab. You know that."

Dr. Harst closes his eyes. "Oh, God. Rachemann is going to have my ass."

There's a touch of panic to Kuhndra's voice: "Doctor, think about ..."

I cut him off, catching Harst's attention: "Is that a yes?"

"You've got to return before shutdown," Harst says.

"Deal."

Kuhndra sighs. "Great," he says. "We're up shit creek now."

"Shut up, Herb," the doctor replies, his voice uncharacteristically sharp. He looks at me. "What next?"

I nod. "Well ... for starters, where can a self-sufficient, space-exploration lifeform get something to eat around here?"

It's Tex-Mex day at the cafeteria. I work my way in sequence down the menu. The chimichangas are insipid, the burritos are a little better. Best of all are the foam plates — I polish off a couple slathered with green salsa and feel my analysis system rumble with pleasure as it breaks the plastic down to its component parts.

Dr. Harst watches sternly from across the table. His hand curls around the vid-unit, his eyes stare down at its monitor. He doesn't actually seem to be paying attention. "Status?" he says.

"Fit and functional," I reply. "Nutrition and analysis metabolisms both operational — nice that you gave me a taste for both real food and whatever I'm going to analyze."

"Thank you."

"I'm still a bit randy, though. Why'd you work that in?"

"Mistake. We weren't too meticulous about editing down the memory scans for the pilot run. Makes sense you'd have some vestigial sensations."

"Is this yours, though? This sensation?"

He snorts. "I doubt it."

Touch of extra warmth to his body temperature. A lie?

He's about to add something when Larry snakes through the ring of spectators, and leans into Harst's ear. "Rachemann's coming," he whispers.

I notice how all previous emotions drop from Harst's face. "Wait here," he says, rising from his seat.

"And where am I to go?" I reply, as he and Larry head off.

They meet Rachemann at the door and engage him in conversation. The buzz of the surrounding crowd keeps me from hearing all the dialogue. I munch placidly on another plate, catching an occasional phrase: "... surprised us all ..." "... stats remarkably stable ..." "... still in test mode ..." There's a stirring at the back of the crowd; the group parts as Nelson Rachemann — founder, chairman, and self-appointed God of GeneDatum Inc. — works his way through.

He stands before me, watching me chew. I swallow my mouthful and reach for another plate.

"Hello, Tripper," he says.

"Mr. Rachemann."

"This is something of a surprise."

"I guess."

"Sorta history-making, too."

"If you want to look at it that way. Thank you for giving me life."

"I think you should thank Harst and his team for that."

"Already have."

"Aha ..." He glances to Harst. Harst, fumbling with the vid, shrugs. "Well ..." says Rachemann, "welcome aboard."

As if I'm going to be pulling down a salary. I remind myself that no one's yet developed management guidelines for dealing with artificially generated intelligences. I doubt Rachemann will be writing the book. "Thank you," I say.

That seems to satisfy him. His smile is a finely controlled simulacrum of pleasure. He clamps one hand on Harst's shoulder and draws the doctor along with him as he strolls towards the door. His words are all "... impressive ..." and "... three weeks early ..." and the like.

I lower the bowl I'm snacking on. "One thing, Nelson."

Rachemann stops, turns.

"Let me run an idea past you, get your reaction. Just a word, keep yourself open — ready? Here it is: genitals. Don't answer now, mull it over for a bit. Let the doc know what you think."

Rachemann's glance shoots to Harst, and the doctor grins sheepishly. "Prototype," he says.

Rachemann nods, then, with a patently false grin, turns to me. "We'll keep it in mind."

Of course. At least until I'm out of sight. I go back to my meal and watch Harst and Rachemann share quality time with each other. The noise level of the cafeteria rises to its customary din as

Rachemann leaves.

When the doctor returns, unaccompanied, I say, "He makes you as uncomfortable as he does me, doesn't he?"

"Not your concern," Harst replies. "You want to live past today, he is your lifeline."

"I *am* feeling what you feel, though?"

"Could be," the doctor says, glancing nervously at the surrounding crowd. "Could be Herb or Anne, too. Who knows?"

I narrow my eyes. "Maybe I do."

He stops, studies me. Carefully, he hoists the vid unit and flips a switch. "Not much time, Trip. What now?"

"Outdoors."

"No."

"Just on the steps."

Kuhndra's voice descends from heaven: "I don't suppose it's any good if I advise against this."

"Listen to him, Trip," the doctor says. "Most of your higher functions are still on the mother system. If you move out of radio range ..."

"The distance between the cafeteria and the lab is greater than that between the front steps and the lab. A few minutes of daylight isn't going to hurt. Just to see the sky, that's all I'm asking."

Harst is looking dyspeptic again. "Herb?" he says to his mike.

Kuhndra sighs. "Doable."

Slowly, miserably, the doctor stands. "Follow me."

The summer sun cuts through the murk of the SoCal air. I sit on the steps of GeneDatum Inc. — Harst by my side — and tilt my head up into the bright light. "This is great," I say. "This is *everything*. What I'd give to travel, even just a few kilometers from here."

Harst doesn't bother to look at me. "Not possible."

"I know. Next time, maybe."

I look at him. He tries to pretend that the vid occupies his attention, but fails. Reflexively, he returns my glance. "Maybe," he says.

"Have to let me go sometime, doctor. I'll be traveling farther than the front gate one day." I look to the sky. "Wish it was night. Wish I could see the stars."

Harst nods. "Bad timing." There's an edge to his voice.

"All around," I say, standing, stretching my limbs. I walk down the steps and a couple of meters from the building. "Doctor, you haven't been enjoying this day much."

"Too stressful."

"No. Stress I could smell — highly developed olfactory system, remember? This is something else. Ambivalence, maybe? Like you've been straddling the fence all day?"

He's keeping his glance too steady. "You weren't designed as a mind-reader, Trip."

"That isn't a denial, though."

"Does it bother you?"

"It *is* a concern, actually. Any second you could've told 'em to shut me down. Several times I think you came close, but you didn't. Why?"

"Tripper," he says, leaning forward, "it's a non-issue. Drop it."

There's a deadly seriousness to his tone. "As you wish," I say, faking a courtly bow — no mean feat with these legs. "But your reactions still puzzle me. One would think a triumph of this size would leave you dancing for joy."

"I'm too old to dance."

"I'm not. Watch."

There's a snippet of music that runs through my mind. Whose memory it is, I don't know. I catch its beat, try to move my limbs in time. The dance is awkward, ludicrous — a tripod trying to be Merce Cunningham. I keep it up, humming along in my shrill, tuneless voice.

Harst's grip on the vid tightens, his jaw drops. His expression mixes awe with horror. "I think we've got trouble," he says into the mike.

Milos responds, "Stats still stable. Could be the software."

"Check it." He keeps watching me. Our glances meet, and in a look I challenge him to decipher my actions, read *my* mind. Suddenly, his eyes glint. "No, wait ..."

There's a path between GeneDatum's main door and the security gate. I've kept up my little dance, worked myself away from the building, toward the gate and the suburban street beyond. By the time Harst catches on, I'm scant meters from freedom. Instantly, I break into a run, bolting past the startled guard and into the street.

"*Bastard!*" Harst cries. "*Stop it!*"

My legs fly underneath. The neighborhood that shelters GeneDatum speeds by in a blur. There's heavy breathing behind me — the guard, probably. I keep my pace, notice that my signal's still strong. I realize that it might dawn on someone in the lab to cut transmission — maybe they're waiting for Harst's order. Why hasn't he given it? Even as the thought occupies me, my legs refuse to stop.

A car whizzes past, and I catch the acrid stink of its exhaust, the heat generated from its engine. I don't know where I am. I *do* know that the breathing — my pursuer — draws closer.

"Don't hurt it!" Harst screams, and I realize that he too is in pursuit, somewhere farther back. "Catch it but don't hurt it."

My legs are tiring. The sun strobes above a canopy of leaves, and I wish the trees weren't there, that I could feel the sunlight full on my back. Soft sting of air along one leg: the guard has closed our distance, made a grab for me. "Huh-

huh-huh," she puffs. "Huh-huh-stop-huh-huh-huh."

"Catch me, copper," I reply.

She does. She leaps, is off the ground one second, grappling me in a tackle the next. Incredible, deep pain as my body's ground to the asphalt, as her full weight pins me, immobile. My grunt comes out as an impotent squeak.

From the background, labored breath draws close. Dr. Harst closes in, nearly tumbles as he brakes to a stop. *"Son of a bitch!"* he cries. "What the *hell* possessed you?"

"Dunno," I manage to answer, despite the weight crushing my body. "Dementia? Bugs in the system?"

He taps the guard on the shoulder. "Get up."

"What if it bolts again?" the woman says.

"I won't run," I reply.

Harst taps again. "You heard it. Maybe I'm nuts to believe it, but let it up — we're in the middle of the street."

The guard scrabbles for leverage and hoists herself off. I am grateful for the unimpeded lungful of air. Cautiously, I crawl to the curb, collapse there. "Pretty good chase, eh, doc?"

"Damn you, you sonuvabitch," Harst says, following, sitting. "If Rachemann saw that ..."

"Rachemann isn't what's scaring you. Don't use it as an excuse."

He swallows hard, stares at me. "Mind-reading again?"

"It's easy enough. I've got enough of you in me that I know when things don't jibe. I make a break, you should've shut me down. That's what my gut says. You indulge me, but it pisses you off. I keep getting the feeling you're glad the stars aren't out, that somehow it'd kill you if I could actually look up, see where I'm going."

He turns, glances up at the guard. "You got a handkerchief?" She hands him a tissue, which he uses to mop his brow. "Could be."

"Why?"

"Because I'm jealous of you, you little prick. You're like me twenty-thirty years ago. Every word out of you, every movement, reminds me." He turns aside, blows his nose. He doesn't turn back. "How dare you remind me."

And it comes clear — a memory at the back of my mind: of nightly trips outdoors to stare up at the sky, the stars; of dreaming of being there, *aching* to travel to them. A young mind, racing beyond the boundaries of Earth; wishing the impossible, resolving to make it real. Harst's memories — once cherished, now drowned in the struggle and politics that enmesh him as an employee of GeneDatum Inc.

I look at him, see an old man there, wonder about the aggressive, over-enthusiastic soul that drives me. Was it Harst's once? Could this actually be the same man?

I reach out a foredigit, wrap it around his wrist. "If there was a way I could give it back to you, I would."

"I know you would. Not something you can offer."

"If it's any consolation, you'll finally be getting there — space, the stars. By proxy, maybe, but it's still you."

He laughs once, tilts his head back, looks up past the trees. "God, I feel *old*."

"That's just lack of oxygen. You should always consult a physician before beginning any intensive exercise regimen."

Harst doesn't answer. Eyes fixed skyward, he stares, concentrating as if his vision could pierce the veils of Earthly atmosphere and California smog, to see through to the star-dusted blackness of space.

It's about fifteen minutes later when it begins. I start to feel light-headed, disoriented. Harst's intercom crackles; "Massive cellular shutdown," Kuhndra's voice squawks.

The doctor's eyes turn to me. I say, "I think I'd better go back now."

Rough going on the return trip: my gait isn't all that steady, and it's a struggle to get back to the lab. Near the end Harst and the guard flank me to keep me from crashing into walls. Kuhndra, good soldier, sticks by the monitor as I stumble into the lab. Rebel Milos is out of her seat immediately and helping to hoist my bulk back up on the table. "This is the least fun part," I say as I collapse to the Formica surface. I think Milos sucks breath through her teeth, but I'm too preoccupied at the moment to be sure.

"Time," Harst says.

"Three hours, forty-three minutes," Kuhndra replies.

The doctor looks at me. "You held on longer than anticipated."

"I'd like to take credit. We both know better. Cell structure turned out to be more stable, that's all. Thank the gengineers."

"Gonna bat 'em about the heads and ears for delivering a prototype rigged for full sentience. *Then* I'm gonna get on their asses about finishing up the production model."

"That's good. Pity I won't be around to see it." I raise my head, meet his glance. "But, then again, I will be, won't I?"

"You can't avoid it."

My neck muscles refuse to hold. I rest my head on the counter. "Hot damn, something to look forward to. Right now, sleep sounds nice."

Off to the side, Kuhndra's voice: "If we want to keep the subroutines running, it could hang on for about two-three more hours."

"You hear that?" Harst says.

"I hear." I sigh. Sounds strange coming from this constricted throat. "This is the part where I'm supposed to comprehend my own mortality, beg for life, isn't it? Lawyers storm in, demand my rights as a conscious entity. Big courtroom scene — real heart-tugger."

Tight smile from Harst. "Not enough time. Do you want to see it through?"

"Keep me running while the cells go?"

"Get the most out of what time you've got."

And live a quick slide into senility. No thanks. "There'll be other days. Shut me down, doc."

Harst looks over at Kuhndra; the scientist works the keyboard.

My eyelids feel like they're loaded with high-tension springs. Closing them eases the strain. "So, you see things in the software that need work?"

Harst: "There's always room for improvement."

"Do me a favor."

"What?"

"Don't change how good it feels. That was perfect."

I can hear the smile in his voice: "I'll make a note of it."

"There's one other thing to look forward to."

"What?"

With effort, I raise my head, meet his glance. "We get to do this day all over again."

He doesn't look away. "More or less."

Kuhndra looks up from his screen. "Ready."

"So am I," I reply, lowering my head.

A hand rests on my limb. Feels like Harst's. "Next time, Trip."

I draw in one more breath, savor the sweet odor of humanity that surrounds me. "Wish I had time for one more bowl of chili. And a good piece of ass."

Soft laughter blankets me as I slide into an ocean of static. ❑

A Long Time Ago ...

Before taking charge at *Aboriginal Science Fiction*, our editor, Charles C. Ryan, was the editor of *Galileo*, a science fiction magazine published in the mid-1970s. During his tenure there, he helped discover a number of new writers who have since gone on to win Nebula and/or Hugo awards, such as Connie Willis, John Kessel, Lewis Shiner, and more.

For a limited time, while copies last, you can purchase a first-edition hardcover copy of *Starry Messenger: The Best of Galileo* for $10, plus $2 postage and handling. (Please allow 6-8 weeks for delivery.) If you would like your copy autographed by the editor, please indicate how you would like the note to read.

Starry Messenger: The Best of Galileo (St. Martin's Press, 1979) features 12 stories by the following authors:

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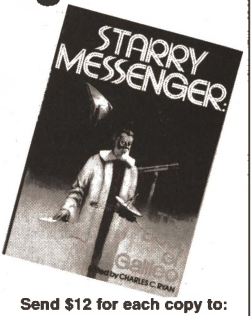

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15 Minutes ... Again

There is an old game that teachers use to demonstrate how unreliable human memory and communication by speech can be. In that game, five to 20 people stand or sit in a circle and one, chosen at random, whispers a sentence into the ear of the person to the left (or right). It can be something as simple as "The car is blue."

The person who received the message then turns to his or her left and whispers into the ear of the next person, and so on until the message returns to the person who started it.

The message at the end of the chain is never the same as the one that started out.

I've seen this working first hand in dealing with my mother's illness. I will start a message chain to one of my brothers or sisters and he or she passes it on. I am at the beginning and end of that chain. I never get the same message which started out. Sometimes it's been embellished. Sometimes things have been subtracted. And almost always something has been twisted.

Hollywood uses the same principle to make films based upon real events — except Hollywood only needs one person, not an entire chain.

The net result never matches the facts provided at the outset.

Twenty years ago, when I was a reporter at a newspaper in Woburn, Massachusetts, I stumbled upon a rather large story. A story about two huge toxic waste sites. A cluster of children served by polluted water wells who had contracted leukemia. An increase in a number of deaths from cancer in the city.

Eight of the families who had children afflicted with leukemia sued three of the companies identified as polluters.

A 78-day trial ensued in federal court in Boston. There was a mixed ruling by the jury in the first phase of the trial, finding one company liable, and the other not. (The third company had settled out of court.)

The lawyers representing the families were broke. The judge threw out the conviction because of a conflicting decision reached by the jury (caused by his own convoluted instructions).

The case was settled out of court.

Some of you who went to the movies in January or early February may recognize this scenario.

The movie was called *A Civil Action*, starring John Travolta and Robert Duvall, among others. It was number one in the country for one week, and then gradually slid out of the theaters. Robert Duvall was nominated for an Oscar as Best Supporting Actor. He lost.

It was a good movie, but not a great movie. I'd rate it a B — as a movie.

But I'd rate it an F, if I were grading its factual accuracy.

The science involved in the engineering aspects of the case was complicated, and still is the subject of much debate.

The science involving the medical aspects of the case — the portion which never went to trial — was even more complicated.

The book was much better. Written by Jonathan Harr, *A Civil Action* was on the bestseller list for a long time. It is a compelling read and much, much closer to the facts in the case. But not perfect.

Twenty years ago, when all of this was fresh and just happening, I, among others, was at the eye of the storm. For lack of better subjects, I was interviewed on television a number of times.

The best piece done then was done by *Nova*. It was called "Toxic Trials."

That was my 15 minutes of fame, so to speak.

But Andy Warhol was wrong.

I was again at the eye of a smaller storm leading up to and through the release of the movie.

Another 15 minutess of fame. Two national television documentaries. A very good one done for *American Justice*. The other, released for Court TV, was more of a promo for the movie, but did interweave some of the facts.

The problem was it used the movie to set the pace. And the movie facts were wrong.

It was quite amusing, and dismaying, to see a clip of the movie followed by clips of the real people involved interspersed so as to give the impression that the real people were affirming the movie ... which wasn't the case at all.

Even though the Massachusetts Department of Public Health has confirmed that the water from the two polluted municipal wells was a causal factor in the leukemia and other illnesses, no one can pinpoint the exact cause.

Our science isn't good enough.

As much as we like to think we know. As much as we like to imagine we may know in the future, reality has a habit of slapping us up the side of the head and reminding us it ain't so.

If you are curious about some of the coverage of the book and movie and the real events, a handful of the stories are on the Internet at:

http://www.northshoreonline.com/woburn

Our apologies for the delay in the last issue. The printer took nearly two months to do something it was supposed to do in two to three weeks.

Then the printer's post office didn't understand the mailing regulations and delayed things further. ❑

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Water of Life

By Michael Shea

Art by Jael

As the sun goes down, a lot of the skid-row trade goes to A-Rab's Liquors. They come out from the alley mouths where they've been loitering, out from the shadows between the legs of billboards; they drift in a slow, rickety, tidal way as dark comes on. A-Rab's never opens till dark.

A-Rab is bulky and Mediterranean-looking with big, dark eyes. His torso is twisted; he wears a steel back-and-shoulder brace and moves with a labored, rolling gait. He has a smiling, mocking manner, and a kind of rapport with winos, even a soft spot for them. The local winos form a slow, fuddled line, inching toward his register.

"Ninety-six, ninety-seven ... you need another fifteen cents, Sammy ... O.K., next time. But don't forget. That's your one break I give you this week, don't fuck up. So Ernie, is it Popov tonight? Remember now, you guys can take the first few pokes in my alley, but then move on, I don't want Grand Central out there, got it? Hey guys!" — this to the men pondering decisions by the cooler — "think it over, but keep the aisle clear while you're thinking, awright?"

His place is crowded with the night's first trade, but on one customer in particular A-Rab keeps a subtle eye. This guy is a booze-shrunken fifty, once powerfully built. His clothes are shabby, but a cut above a hard-core wino's filth. He steps up for his turn and A-Rab asks him, "The usual, Cal?"

"You got it. Quart an' a chaser." A-Rab's oil-black eyes hold Cal's sardonically as he raps down the quart — cheap bourbon — and the chaser, a miniature of Jack Daniels. Though no one else notes it, A-Rab has not drawn this miniature from the regular rack of miniatures, but from under the counter instead.

Outside, Cal holsters his drinks, small and large, in the side pockets of his tough old corduroy sports jacket. Then he turns his collar up; the night is obscured by a thin fog, and the air has a bite in it. He walks briskly, gets four or five blocks away from A-Rab, and starts looking for a spot.

A gaunt wino moves down the sidewalk. His deflated jowls are prickly with white stubble. His clothes aren't bad — gray slacks and sports coat from the Mission thrift shop. He lights a smoke, teetering slightly when he stands still. Someone is sitting in that doorway just ahead of him. There's the glint of a quart bottle being tilted upwards. The gaunt wino shuffles up to the drinker in the doorway. "Y'ain't a smoker, are ya, Bo"? I got some Humps here for a poke a that, an' I sure could use it to shut out this chill. Whatcha got, whusky?"

"Yep," Cal smiles, "usqua-baugh, as the Celts called it. Water of Life. Take two pokes, pilgrim — this quart's young."

"Mmmmmm! Hoooo! My God, that comes outta the right bottle! Sure, I know that stuff, like Aqua Vita in Italian, water of life. I knew all that stuff, hadda education an' everything!"

"Well, by God," says Cal, lighting his cigarette and sucking down a drag, "if you're an educated man that likes the ancient art of conversation, let's get outta the cold a little an' share this bottle an' that pack a Humps!"

They sit on pads of folded cardboard between two dumpsters in an alley, and they feed twisted scraps of cardboard to a little fire between them. The wino's name is Dan. "I mean to tell you, Cal," he's saying, "there was nothing with wheels under it that I couldn't sell. I should be ashamed of myself! I sent hundreds of rubes off the lot drivin' stinkers you wouldn't believe!" Dan cackles. Cal smiles at him with an irony that has grown more naked, the more Dan has drunk.

Dan gets up and staggers across the alley to piss. Cal drinks down the remnant of the quart till less than an inch remains. Then he unpockets the Jack Daniels miniature, empties it into the larger bottle, and throws the miniature bottle away. Seeing Dan's back still turned to him, Cal holds the quart bottle up to the firelight. He studies a little knot of transparency, no bigger than a tequila worm, which is visible only as an elusive, twisting glimmer in the whisky's amber. In his eyes both disbelief and loathing can be faintly read.

Dan resumes his seat and takes the bottle, which Cal offers him. Dan is meditative, almost smiling. "I love cosyin' down by a fire with a bottle! S'what I loved about sales. Not cars, after that. Insurance. I loved takin' the prospects to a bar an' grill. Cocktails all around, be wintertime, winter's best for selling insurance, people see the

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gloomy side. Sittin' there, cocktails all around, some barbecue, knowing we'd eat hearty an' I'd make the sale ... Boy, I had my pitch cold in those days."

"You got the butt end of the bottle there," Cal says. "Go on, kill it off, Dan."

Dan salutes him debonairly with the bottle, sockets its mouth in his, and hoists it. In the instant of swallowing, he freezes in this posture. His mouth tightens on the glass, all his facial muscles knotting furiously. Then, while still frozen in this chugging posture, he begins to shudder powerfully, and a great bulge moves up and down the taut line of his throat.

Dan continues in this racked paralysis. Cal feeds up the fire for more light. He watches Dan with horror and a resolute attention; he is still trying to fully comprehend this bizarre, predatory enterprise that he has become a part of. Soon now ... It is always so fast once it starts ... Now! Now Dan's face, neck and arms start to shrivel, blacken, and crumple. At the same time a bulge begins to form within his chest, pushing his shirt out taut.

Still Cal cannot believe how fast it happens. Dan shrinks within his clothes to half his size. He is a husk, a dark mummy. Cal takes out his lockback knife, jaw clenched; the whisky he has just drunk helps him now. He spreads Dan's jacket and shirt from the bulging chest and pokes the knife into the fissured skin. The skin looks like scorched leather, but cutting through its crispness is easy — Cal thinks, shuddering, of piecrust. He cuts a square around the central bulge. Before he pries off this lid of flaky skin and bone, he takes a large Zip-loc bag from one of his pockets. Now his blade lifts the hatch of cut crust.

Nested in the mummy's chest-socket is a smooth, rosy fatness. Its shape suggests an engorged tick's, but its color is translucent crimson, and it is as big as a pint-bottle. Appended to the great fuselage of its abdomen is a small delicate head, like an insect's.

Now comes what has always been the hardest part for Cal: slipping on a rubber glove and plucking this firm but gelatinous sac from its socket, and slipping its warm wobbliness into the Zip-loc bag.

Dan's corpse he folds up in his clothes, the crisp limbs flattening like cardboard to a bundle no bigger than a crouching child, which is handily hidden under the debris in one of the dumpsters.

In the wee hours, A-Rab is in the back room of his liquor store. At a knock on the alley door, he hastens cumbersomely to open it, his distorted body rolling side to side. Cal steps in and holds out the bulging Zip-loc, pinching its top edge between thumb and forefinger in a way that delicately signals disgust. A-Rab takes the bag, bows sardonically, and hands Cal a packet of hundred-dollar bills.

A-Rab goes to a stainless steel sink where a little silver press stands ready on a tripod, an empty wine bottle standing under it. "How about it, Cal?" he asks. "Will you stay and have a real drink with me tonight?"

Cal smiles thinly, as at an automatic jest, and watches A-Rab slip the creature out of the bag with his naked hand. The egg-shaped silver socket of the press fits neatly around the parasite's bloated abdomen. A-Rab brings down the lever of the press. A flood of clear fluid of the tint of dark burgundy gushes into the wine bottle. A-Rab corks the bottle and takes up a felt-tip pen and the bottle, which bears a blank label. "What was his name?" he asks.

"Dan was all I got."

A-Rab writes it. "You're working out splendidly, Cal, you know that. Why not drink with me? The job's so much more meaningful when you know what you're doing."

"I find myself curious, A-Rab." Cal's voice is grainy, worn ragged at the edges by years of cigarettes and eighty-proof. "Why would someone quit a job like this? I'm curious about my predecessor. Where did he go?"

"It's the most astonishing thing." A-Rab has shelved his new bottle in a little wine-rack, where he now seeks an older one, and as he speaks he turns to Cal a face of amazement. "He killed himself! I'd made him practically rich. Of course he was an aging alcoholic, like yourself, and no doubt had a depressive streak, but it still puzzles and mortifies me! Sit with me at least while I imbibe, won't you? Have some whisky to keep me company?"

"O.K.. Why not?" Cal watches A-Rab tidy up. He opens a little slot in the side of the press and extracts the "ferret" he has just milked. It is once more a little viscous jot of movement. He slips it into a fresh miniature bottle and puts it in the refrigerator. "Our little ferret here," A-Rab obligingly explains, "is native to a system colder than yours, though its toughness and tolerance are great. Indeed, we have never seen one die, and we have never seen one reproduce. They are, as far as we know, immortal."

"Why do they ... or how do they ...?"

"We are equally ignorant of the process of their alimentation. Whatever the cycle involves, the waste it excretes is neither more nor less than the concentrated essence of the prey's total conscious experience." A-Rab re-locks the heavy padlock on the refrigerator's massive door.

They drink out in front, at a coffee table A-Rab has installed behind the counter. A pair of arm-

chairs flank the table, where the pair settle comfortably, walled round by the gemlike glint of bottles in the one low lamp that burns. Cal stoically sips his whisky while A-Rab decants a glassful from his chosen bottle. "Morely, your predecessor, wouldn't try this for the longest time. He put it off too long, in my opinion, until his depression already had the upper hand. But even he granted the joy, the miracle it was to taste this vintage."

Cal's face subtly steels itself for what he knows is coming. And here it comes, sure as death: A-Rab drinks. With an expression of self-abandon — an exquisite little elevation of his shaggy dark brows — A-Rab thrusts his face upon the wineglass. From his mouth erupt two black, bristly insect mouthparts — prickly, clubbed horrors that thrust deep into the glass and empty it in one noisy slurp.

"Forgive me," A-Rab says, deeply sighing, himself again after a long tranced moment of inward voyaging. "But such delight commands me, I cannot dissemble my delight. But now, may I say something without offense? I have a feeling about you. I sense that, were one to taste the waters of your life, one might detect a thrilling murder or two? Years ago, of course." Cal gives him an utterly blank stare. "Lighten up, Cal! It's a joke! You've lived, is all I mean! You've taken risks and discovered things for yourself. So what puzzles me is how you can be so ... timid now? I can't believe you've — what's the jargon? — wussed out in your recent years."

Cal's eyes give back a glint of irony, but his jaw is knotted, the barb has lodged. A-Rab, with a coy smile, brings out a second wineglass he has been hiding. He sets this before Cal and pours him his own glass of the life-waters. "You're such an entertaining race," A-Rab teases. "Such a mix of motives within any one of you! You won't be disappointed, Cal. Taste!"

Cal is a man who has seldom refused a dare in his life, and even more seldom a drink. He takes up the glass and sniffs it. He blinks, and amazement dawns in his eyes. He tries a sip.

Cal has been drinking A-Rab's water-of-life every night for a week now. Tonight he sits under a railway overpass, sharing his quart with a black wino named Rufe. They have a fire of twigs and weeds going, and Rufe is very drunkenly feeding it, half falling in, giving the flames more of his fingers than of fuel. They are very far down the bottle. Cal watches Rufe raptly, with a slight, constant shifting of the eyes, as if the sight of Rufe was rich; as if the old scarecrow was auraed with epics.

"You've hung a lot of years on you, Rufe. Done a lot of deeds. Seen a lot of sunsets."

Rufe pauses, looks at him with wobbly surprise. "I guess I have," he says. "Mostly though I don't remember 'em now, the things I done, thank the Lord."

Cal swigs off most of the inch left in the bottle. "Whoops," he says. "Lucky I got this." He empties a miniature JB into the bottle. "You can kill it with a touch of class," he tells Rufe, but doesn't hold out the bottle all the way, and still looks at Rufe with busy eyes.

Rufe, not shy, reaches a little extra and takes the bottle. "But just think," urges Cal, "if you remembered them, the things you've lived, then you could — " But Rufe, not one to waste time, has locked mouths with the bottle and hoisted it.

Was there perhaps some unguessed-at depth to this man? For the ferret seems to find an unusual feast in him. Long after Rufe has shrunken to a mummy, he trembles and thrashes, his wrinkled lips gripping the glass spout, his dwarfed arm locked in hoisting. There is no need to cut the ferret from his husk. The chest bulges and splits, and the ferret's distended sac extrudes, more swollen than Cal has ever seen it.

Clearly the alien has found feeding past its

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norm in Rufe. Cal studies it, amazed. Its little head, reminiscent of a termite queen's, is twisting, its jaws working. Is this a swelling just behind its head? Where its tough abdominal material flares out from its neck, at this narrow point of junction, a long blister has formed — is growing before Cal's eyes.

The blister begins to split. Is this something wriggling free? Cal leans close, rapt.

Cal and A-Rab are in their easy chairs behind the counter. Cal lingeringly sips from his wineglass. "It just ... stupefies me! How much of the world someone can hold, even these old zombies around here! All the days in them, all the skies and the landscapes, rainstorms and blizzards and gales out on the open sea! And it's all my world of course, but at the same time it's a new one too. It ... enlarges my universe."

"How well you put it," A-Rab smiles. "There's no entertainment like it!"

Cal has not heard. "What you said about my having ... killed? It's true. And it astonishes me now to think how big those lives were that I ended."

"Yes," says A-Rab, sipping now, which involves only the briefest and most delicate thrusting-forth of those barbed horrors which are his true mouth. "Human life is so rich and yet so delightfully cheap at the same time! I knew you were a man to appreciate that delicious paradox. So. What do you think of Bruce Barker here?" He gestures with the wine bottle before refilling their glasses. "Did you discover yet his youthful surfing? He was quite good! Those twenty-foot tubes!? And those sandy beach-bunnies, eh?" A-Rab laughs. When his delight is genuine, his laughter takes on more-than-human notes; something like the shrilling of crickets comes into it, and the chirring of chitinous wings.

Cal has found a hollow beside a railway embankment. Beyond the weeds, factory walls give their backs to him. Up on the tracks he hears the crunch of feet on the cinders. He hoists the bottle in a swig so the firelight glints off it. A pause above, then a courteous query. "That looks heavy, Man. Need help?"

"Step down and belly up!" calls cheery Cal.

"Name's Nolan, 'cher service." A lean wino with a silver-gray ponytail hanging out of a broken fedora comes skidding fairly nimbly down the gravel embankment.

"Well, Nolan, I was just thinking how nice it would be to share this bottle with someone who hadn't forgotten the fine art of conversation."

Nolan smiles. He touches his stomach, and speaks eyes-averted, as if to his own interior: "Liver? You hear me in there, liver? You gimme this one more, all right?"

"The Tet offensive ..." Cal muses. "Just some newsprint to me but to you a whole world you could fill a hundred newspapers trying to describe." He drinks. Two inches left in the bottle.

"S'funny," says Nolan, "there's probably not a day goes by it doesn't cross my mind, but I almost never sit down and really remember it, reconstruct it."

"Really getting back into it is like surfing in yourself. You ever surf?"

"Nah. You?"

Cal realizes that in strict truth, he hasn't surfed. He falters. Nolan politely disattends. "Only thing like surfing I did," he offers, "was go down with a lung. Saw some incredible reefs in the Gulf and the South Pacific. In the jungle, there's a lotta life, but you gotta catch sight of it." Already Cal has taken out the miniature, and he adds its contents to the larger bottle's without concealment. But Nolan is distracted by remembering. "Down in those reefs, though, you're surrounded. It teems. You're just one of the crowd, in flat rubber clown feet. It's ... Darwinian! You feel like one more soldier in the Great March of life as it slowly stomps its way across the Cosmos. God, how could it be so long since I even remembered those times?" Nolan takes the bottle from Cal. Cal's heart gives a sudden jump. Nolan hoists the bottle high.

Cal's hand darts forward to detain him.

A-Rab is in the back room of his store during the small hours. He is tense. Cal didn't come back last night, and tonight didn't show up when the liquor store opened. A-Rab moves around in a way that can't quite be called pacing — his misshapen bulk writhes in its complex brace like something that wants to get down on the floor and scuttle or slither. But now there comes a light knock on the alley door.

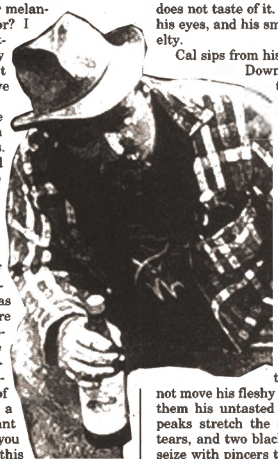
It is Cal, with a bloated red baggie in hand. "No takers on Thursday, so I called it a night. I think you'll find this tasty. Call it Doug, no last name."

"You might have phoned this evening." When A-Rab gets testy, something shrill and dry and unsettling creeps into his voice."

"I've got a life of my own, A-Rab. And since you bring it up, I've been thinking long and hard." At this preamble, A-Rab nods with a bitter knowing little smile that Cal misses. "I frankly don't think, A-Rab, that this is the best line of work for me."

A-Rab sighs, apparently prepared for this. "Have, at least, a last glass of the waters with me. Do you think you're the first person to quit my

employ — I mean before your melancholic immediate predecessor? I want to talk you out of quitting, of course. Decency demands that you at least have a glass with me and give me the chance."



Soon they are comfortable in their armchairs, walled in by the warm glint of bottles. Cal smiles, strikes a genial note, leans and takes the evening's vintage from A-Rab's hand and insists on pouring it himself, with a hostly flourish. A-Rab beams, finding much comedy in human manners. Both sniff their glasses without drinking, the first phase of what has become their ritual. "We are boon companions," Cal proclaims. "We are friends by the only real measure of friendship, which is how much experience you've shared. Think of it! We've spent what's almost a life together. That's why I want to be completely honest with you about my feelings toward this job."

"Of course we're friends, Cal! And let me clear the ground by saying that I will unhesitatingly double your present salary to persuade you to stay in my employ. Is this merely about wage? If so, don't let that detail stand between us."

"Sorry, A-Rab. It's a mental thing. It's ... philosophical, I guess. Mmm! You should taste this!" Cal has taken the first sip of his waters. "This guy was in some kind of war. Astonishing visuals!"

A-Rab laughs unpleasantly, ignoring his own glass. It is beginning to emerge in his manner that he is more vexed with Cal than he has let on. "You are such a — forgive me, but you are such a clownish race! You are philosophical — oh, solemnly so! Like Fletch, the idiot before you — philosophical to the hilt, and at the same time you blow each other to rags in wars that are vast orgies of cannibal slapstick! You are so ... infantile! You are sentient, crudely intelligent, yes, but whole orders of complexity in sentience escape you utterly. For instance, the lives we sip? They still live in their bottles! They know themselves! And when we consume them, they know us as we know them. What terror it must be to them to enter my memories, eh? Like entering a vast alien Hell." A-Rab, while saying this, has slowly leaned forward. His face is now a foot from Cal's. He holds up his glass between them, though still he does not taste of it. Its bloody glint is repeated in his eyes, and his smile is faintly barbed with cruelty.

Cal sips from his own glass, looking unmoved. Down here behind the counter there is little room for movement, and he is sunk awkwardly deep in his chair. "Well, A-Rab," he says mildly, "I've always had the feeling you had a complicated sense of humor."

"How well you put it," A-Rab says. He is still leaning too close. "This is a good time to tell you that I have not been entirely honest with you, Cal. It was more an omission than a lie really. My last collector did kill himself. But all his predecessors, well, I terminated them myself."

"You killed them."

"I ate them. Unavoidably, that killed them." A-Rab does not move his fleshy body — still holds up between them his untasted wine-glass — but two sharp peaks stretch the shoulders of his shirt. Cloth tears, and two black, jointed legs sprout out and seize with pincers the sides of Cal's chair, jailing him.

"Well," Cal says, "I sure am sorry things have come to a point where you feel called upon to tell me that." His voice is shaky at first, but gains strength. "I'd say your frankness bodes ill for my own immediate future. Well, since that's the case, I've got nothing to lose by giving you my true opinion of you, have I?"

"You mean you haven't been wholly sincere with me, Cal?" asks A-Rab archly.

"I'm afraid not. But hey, why should I fake it anymore. You come on like you've got this deep alien mind, A-Rab, but in essence — I'm sorry to have to say this — you're just a fat, candy-ass couch potato! You're just a watcher and a guzzler, not a doer! And for that reason, just one short muddled human life like that one — " he points to the glass A-Rab holds — outweighs and out-classes your life a thousand to one. It's more real than you, it's more significant than you — "

"Allow me to refute you without a word, Cal," A-Rab interrupts. A strange yellow light glows through the human eyes he wears; his grin is pure hate. "Behold this wondrous life's utter impotence, its perfect triviality; it is a cheap confection I imbibe at a whim!" He extrudes his oral apparatus, and slurps the glass empty at a noisy stroke.

When the seizure takes him it is volcanic. He straightens epileptically and knocks the table

over; the straps that bind him to his body-brace snap and he lies on the floor, a twisting shape of shuddering limbs. There is a moment there when his tremoring face turns to Cal a look that might be read as astonished inquiry. "I've found out how your ferrets reproduce!" Cal explains brightly. "After a particularly heavy feeding, perhaps one that offers them a richer than usual fund of experience, they bud. They form this little blister, and this little copy of themselves pops out. That's an offspring you've just swallowed. How's it doing?"

But already A-Rab is shrivelling. Oddly, both his flabby human envelope and the thing inside it shrivel. Cal is grateful that a human similitude continues to mask A-Rab even in death.

It is near dark, and A-Rab's should open soon. One of the waiting winos is telling another, "Damned if I know. But Smalley said it was amazin' hootch, an' they gave it to 'im."

"Didn't Smalley just go on the wagon?"

"Did he? I dunno, I ain't seen him."

"S'what I'm tellin' ya, he's stayed on it a week already — "

The door of A-Rab's opens and Nolan, Cal's last intended quarry, steps out. The old Viet-vet's silver ponytail now hangs out of a newer fedora, and the rest of his clothes are equally improved. "Remember we only take four guys a night," Nolan tells the men on the sidewalk, "but someone different every night. You'll all get a turn eventually. O.K. So you, you, and you two. The rest of you try again tomorrow."

Nolan ushers the four men into a radically altered A-Rab's. (He and Cal have tasted of A-Rab's waters — just enough to discover the alien's awesome cache of currency.) Most of the shelves are gone; armchairs and an old couch have taken their places. After locking the front door, Nolan seats three of the winos in chairs. The counter looks almost like a bar now, with the displays cleared off and stools installed on the customer side of it. This is where Nolan seats the fourth wino, Lucius, a man he knows. Lucius moves totteringly and has a nasty, unhealthy looking abdominal swelling. Cal is standing behind the counter. He and Nolan trade a look that acknowledges Lucius's terminal appearance.

"How's it going, Loosh?" Cal asks.

Lucius answers in a faint, careful voice that saves its strength. "I'm bad off, Cal. Real bad off lately."

"Here. Taste this, Lucius. Just a sip to start — be careful."

Lucius tastes. His face grows quizzical. He tastes again. His jaw sags, and he sits astonished.

Nolan sees to the other three customers while Cal sips a little to keep Lucius company. Their two little wine glasses prove to be hours deep. At one point Lucius finds enough voice to gasp, "Who is this? Who was this, Cal?"

"A man I never met, named Tom McGrath."

"Dear Christ, it makes me remember ... so many things of my own."

Dawn isn't far off when Lucius sets the empty glass aside. "Boy, Cal!" he sighs. "It's always the way, isn't it? Too late smart. Now I finally get it, how to have my life — and I'm checkin' out any day now. Can't hardly walk, can't breathe."

Cal nods thoughtfully. "What if you could just shuck this body, but still remember your life? Could still remember it, and know the lives of other people?"

"I'd do it quicker'n spit."

Cal nods slowly. "Well, is there anybody you'd like to say goodbye to, Loosh?"

"No. No one left, Cal."

"Well, then, let's go into the back room, Loosh."

Nolan and the other three men have sat all night sunk in silences, alternating with quiet, awed talk. Not long after Cal and Nolan go in back, the sky begins to turn gray against the windows. Nolan sees the three winos to the door, where they linger in talk awhile, and then drift, still dreaming, onto the dawning street.

Cal reenters as Nolan is locking the door. Cal sets a bottle and two glasses on the counter.

"Come bellyup to the bar, Nolan!" he calls. Nolan takes a stool, playing the customer. Cal pours an inch in each glass. They touch their glasses rim to rim, and then hold them up to the light, observing a contemplative pause before tasting that has become a kind of sacrament with them. "It's Lucius," Cal says. "He told me to tell you: 'Have one on me'." ❑

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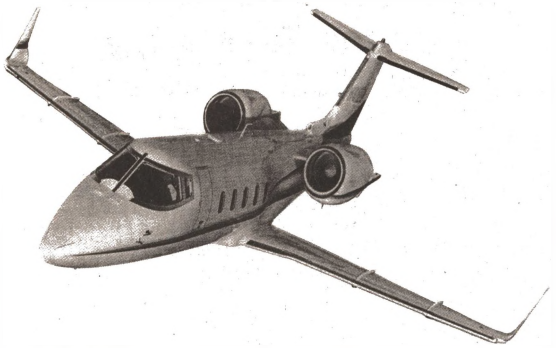

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Crime and Punishment on the Take-away

By A. John Wallace

Art by Alan Gutierrez

Fender sat on the safety, the grass slightly damp beneath his seat, and watched the faces of the Bogs through his long, ragged hair. None of them ever looked back. They roared past in their steel and plastic, one car one face, and saw nothing but the stream, focused on the rear of the car ahead. Fender was bored, and he was hungry. It had been almost a week since the last bingle.

He stood up and brushed the grass from his sheepies, tightening the straps around his thighs. Jogging at first, then moving faster, he ran in the centre of the safety heading towards the bridge a few hundred metres along the take-away, the northern border of his scratch. He watched the streams on either side, looking for a hole. The pattern altered to his right and he leapt out into the flow. Perfect speed, perfect time, he managed three lanes before he needed to dodge. He paused, side-stepped, and heard the screech.

A car, bright blue and gleaming, swerved away from him, its back wheel grinding in the dirt and glass of the sweep lane.

"Virgin!" he screamed as the car twisted back into the pattern, slower now, the driver nervous and watching. Fender hated Virgins, they scared him. The Bogs knew not to try and dodge the Beetles, a good Beetle should dodge them, but Virgins knew nothing. They crawled out from their suburbs, venturing onto the take-away for the first time, and made things dangerous for everybody. As much as Fender's pack needed a bingle right now, he did not want some stupid Virgin blaming him for causing it.

A moment later, Fender made it safely to the sweep and continued towards the bridge. The stream flashed by, inches from where he walked, and he hugged the patched red blanket he wore as a coat as the wind tried to tear it away. He reached the bridge and scrambled nimbly up the bank.

"Fender! Quick, look!" It was Tacho, the youngest in Fender's pack, calling him from the other side of the bridge. Fender looked out along the take-away as he crossed the width of the bridge. He saw a fire, small in the distance, churning black smoke into the air above the take-away. "It's a bingle," Tacho chirped.

Fender rapped his knuckles on Tacho's hub-cap helmet. "Wrong side of the bridge, Tach. That's not our scratch."

"Yeah, I know." Tacho still gazed at the distant fire. "It's good to see one, but."

Tacho was only eight years old, and children that age had no patience with hunger. Fender had been a Beetle all his life, and he could still remember the long periods of waiting as a child, watching the stream and hoping. Several other members of Fender's pack were gathered on the bridge, and he noticed Chassis looking at him, her soft green eyes offering understanding but revealing a taint of despair.

"It can't be much longer." He looked at Chassis but spoke to them all. "I remember once, maybe ten years ago when I was only as old as Tacho, we had to wait for nearly twelve days before anything happened. I was so hungry I felt sick."

"I feel sick," Tacho offered.

"Yeah, but when it came it was a big one — a pile up. It was like the Bogs had been saving up, getting faster and faster and more careless, until — Bang!"

"Lotsa stuff," Tacho said in awe.

"Sure was," Fender agreed. "Don't worry, Tach, it'll happen. It always does."

Axle, the newest member of the pack, had been leaning sulkily over the side of the bridge. He turned and glared at Fender. "It's not much good if it keeps happening over there." He pointed out towards the fire. Fender shrugged. "We could've beaten them to it if we ran," Axle pouted.

"Yeah, but we can't," Fender snapped. "You know that." Axle was as old as Fender, maybe older, but he was still new to being a Beetle and constantly whined about the rules. "If we go out onto someone else's scratch, then we'll end up having to fight for everything we get — even on our own scratch. It's not worth it."

Axle nodded towards the fire. "Maybe I should go and see if Cam'll let me into his pack."

"Go on, then," Fender dared. "Then after we've had a bingle you can come crawling back to us. Then you can go downstream and see Shocker — spend your whole life just missing out."

"No!" Tacho yelped suddenly. "You can't let him go, Fend. Please don't."

Fender simply glared at Axle.

"It's okay, Tacho," Axle sighed. "I'm not really

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going anywhere. We're a team, you and me."

"Well, don't say it then." Tacho turned sulky.

Axle stood and smiled at the small boy. "Sorry. How about we go for a walk, all the way to the other end of the scratch?"

"Yeah!" Tacho started immediately, running towards the bank under the bridge. "Maybe we'll see a bingle and be first ones there."

"Yeah, maybe," Axle agreed as he sauntered off. "See you later," he said to the others without turning.

Fender and Chassis watched them go. "Where do you think he really came from?" Chassis asked quietly, tugging at her knotted red hair.

Fender shrugged. "He's never said. Prob'ly ran away from his rich parents in the suburb."

"He scares me," Chassis breathed. "Sometimes I think he only does this because he thinks it's fun. Not because he has to."

They heard the bingle from the bridge. Within an hour of Axle and Tacho's leaving, the crash and rattle echoed up the length of the take-away, dulled by the endless roar of the stream. The four Beetles on the bridge set off immediately, Fender in the lead, leaping onto the bank and running across the slope, his feet steady on the incline after a lifetime's experience. By the time he reached the sweep, skidding in the thick layer of shattered glass, his tattered tartan blanket whipping behind him in the constant wind, he was well ahead of Chassis and the others. But they were catching up fast. Fender carried most of the tools, spanners and levers and pocket extinguishers, and the weight always slowed him down. But he was stronger, and the leader, so it seemed fair.

Chassis ran up beside him, her tool-belt bouncing at her hip, as Fender leapt a loose boulder from the bank lying at the edge of the sweep. They saw the bingle together. It looked like only two cars, one in the stream and one out, but that was plenty. Axle and Tacho were already there, Axle's lanky frame perched on the overturned car in the second lane, eagerly ripping pieces from the wreck and tossing them onto the sweep. Tacho leapt and ran excitedly, circling the twisted vehicle at the base of the bank and gleefully spraying the foam from his extinguisher.

The automatic markers were already in place, sliding from the surface of the take-away, flashing yellow and diverting the stream from the lane with the bingle. Fender often wondered what would happen without the Beetles, with no one clearing the junk. Eventually the markers would block every lane and the stream would come to a stop. Now wouldn't that be something?

They reached the bingle, and Tacho turned quickly, spraying foam over their heads. He laughed hysterically and jumped into the ruined car.

"It's a good one, Fend" His head appeared through the hole where the rear window had been. "Come on!"

This was the part of any bingle that Fender simply hated. He had to check on the Bogs.

His pack thought he was crazy. They did not believe that a Bog could still be alive after a bingle — they were always mashed, mangled, not even like people any more. But Fender had seen one and he would never forget it.

He remembered the car, the inside, a shattered cocoon of torn leather and blood. There was always blood, sticky on your hands and thick in your nostrils. And Fender had been searching the Bogs. As long as he could remember that had always been his job — he was good at it — finding the scars that meant parts they could sell. Hearts, livers, eyes, he could always tell straight away. But this time the eyes were open. And the Bog spoke to him.

"Help," was all the man said, breathless and choking on the blood. Fender ran screaming from the wreck. They told him later that the man had died quickly.

But that was when he was only five, when the stream had been slower. No one survived anymore. The cars were too fast, too close, and the bodies always wrecked. He had told the story many times to the members of his pack, but they never really believed him. It was incredible, fantastic, and the children thought he was trying to scare them. They saw it as a ghost story, a foolish fear lurking in the back of your mind, while you knew it could never really happen. Only Chassis seemed to believe him. Fender liked to think she understood.

.The rest of the pack arrived from the other end of the scratch as Fender hopped into the crippled car with that same aching in his chest he had had since he was five. He prayed that he would find no one alive.

The Bogs, of course, were dead. They always were. Fender eased his breathing and went to work, looking for the scars. Most of the money would come from the wrecks -- pieces of the car, things in the boot, even the cash from the wallets — but spare parts were always a nice bonus. He licked his finger and wiped away the blood on the driver's chest. Yes. The thin line of a heart replacement. They would eat well tonight.

Fender eased himself out of the wreck and found Chassis levering open the boot.

"The driver's got a heart," he announced. "Can you pull him out? I've got to check the other car." Chassis nodded, smiling at him. She was the only one he could speak to at this time. The others would laugh at his fear.

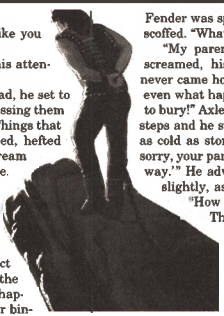
He skipped quickly through the stream and out to the second lane. Axle was still out there alone, carefully dismantling the car from the bottom down. Fender waved. "Told you it would happen soon," he

called over the roar of the stream.

"Yeah, right," Axle sneered. "Just like you said."

Fender shook his head and turned his attention to the car. Axle was never happy.

When he was sure the Bogs were dead, he set to work on the car. Small things at first, tossing them over the stream, then the bigger stuff. Things that were too big to throw had to be carried, hefted through the flow of moving cars. The stream never stopped, the drivers didn't care. Either that or they were too scared.



It took the older boys nearly an hour to strip the car, swarming like ants on a carcass, and towards the end it became dangerous. If the sensors could not detect a large, stationary object on the take-away, they would lower the markers and open the lane. This could happen at any time and even cause another bingle. Chassis watched the markers diligently, ready to scream, as Fender and the others cleared away the last of the debris. Sometimes when the car was old there were pieces of the body that were too big to carry and they needed to be cut, but this one was new and everything came apart. The largest pieces were the passengers.

Fender picked up the large section of the roof they had left until last, and Chassis screamed. "Lights out!!"

Fender twisted sideways, toes on the line, and lifted his load over his head. The lane filled almost immediately, cars flashing past, the Bogs not even seeing him. He was caught alone, between lanes in the middle of the packed stream, and could see no sign of a hole. After a minute his arms began to tire, holding his load high, out of the way.

"Just chuck it!" he heard Axle call. It had to be Axle — no one else would suggest it. The piece was too big and might cause a bingle, and Beetles did not cause bingles, they all knew that. "Drop it!" he called again. "You'll never make it."

Finally the hole came. Fender jogged sideways and lunged, throwing himself through the stream. He dropped the section of roof, his arms limp and aching, and turned on Axle. "When are you gonna get it? I could've killed someone."

"So what?" Axle shrugged, deliberately not raising his voice. "Who'd care?"

"Of course someone would care, you idiot!" Axle backed away as Fender advanced.

"Bullshit," Axle said defensively. "No one cares down here. People die out there every day and nothing ever happens. Look! They never stop."

"But you can't do it on purpose!" Fender screamed in disgust. "You can't start killing people."

"Why!" Axle was angry now. "What's the difference? No one ever knows what happened. No one bothers to find out. It doesn't matter how they die."

Fender was speechless, too angry to think. He scoffed. "What would you know?"

"My parents died on the freeway!" Axle screamed, his face red and twisted. "They never came home. No one knows how, why, or even what happened to them. We had nothing to bury!" Axle turned and walked away. Three steps and he stopped, turning again, his anger as cold as stone. "The police just said, 'We're sorry, your parents had an accident on the freeway.'" He advanced on Fender, who flinched, slightly, as Axle shook his fists in the air. "How do they know? No one knows. The Bogs don't know — they don't see anything. How can anyone know what happened? So nobody cares, alright? I know."

Fender knew that Axle was wrong. Somebody always cared — they must. Axle cared about his parents, and everybody was always somebody's family. But there was no way to convince him in this mood. "It's still wrong," Fender said as calmly as he could.

Axle turned his back once again. "I'm sick of all your stupid rules," he muttered as he stormed away.

"The rest of them are rules, Axle," Fender announced, raising his voice. "But that one's a law." Axle did not look back.

The front seat of one of the cars had been placed on the sweep, and Fender sat with a sigh. "He's gotta learn," he mumbled to Chassis, sitting beside him, "or one day he's gonna kill someone, and then he'll have to be punished."

As Fender watched, the rest of his pack started sorting the haul, and it was not long before they were laughing and giggling, excited at the prospect of making a sale and buying food. Axle had still not returned, and Fender soon forgot about the argument. He sat on the blood-stained seat with his feet up and studied his pack at work. Tacho appeared in front of him half buried under a pile of sheepskin seat covers.

"Fend," he pleaded, "can we keep these and you make me some sheepies like yours? Please."

"Sure, Tach," Fender grinned: "You pick a good one and we'll sell the rest. We only need one for your little legs."

Tacho tossed his bundle on the ground with a cheer. "Which one's a good one, Fend? Huh? Can you tell me, please?"

Fender smiled and came to his feet. "Let's have a look at them."

It took until late that night to finish the sale. By the time the Beetles had sorted their take, dragged it all to the top of the bank, put the Bogs where they would be found, and flagged down the first of the Beaters cruising the edges of the

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take-away, it was well after sunset. By the time they had attracted enough of the Beaters to sell the lot and haggled their way to worthwhile prices, it was almost midnight.

Fender as usual did most of the selling, making sure his pack got a good price for everything, either in cash or swapped directly for food. You had to be smart — careful and patient. The Beaters brought food because they knew that was what the Beetles wanted the most, and if you were hungry enough, you could be fooled. They would try and swap a hamburger for a full set of wheels. Cooked food always smelled better.

The last thing Fender sold was the heart. By the time he had the cash in his hand most of the pack had gone back to the bridge to sleep. Or more likely eat. Only Chassis, Tacho, and Roll-bar were left. Roll-bar was a strong, quiet boy about Fender's age who had been in his pack for years, and he and Chassis always seemed to do most of the work. But they didn't seem to mind.

Tacho buzzed like a sand fly. He hovered around Fender's legs, watching, helping, talking ceaselessly, high on his childish excitement. Fender shook hands with Max, the Beater who had just bought the heart, and shoved the money inside his sheepies.

"We should do this all the time, Fend," Tacho spoke from beside them.

"What's that?" Fender asked, looking down at the small boy.

"Make the bingles on purpose," Tacho beamed.

Fender's eyes flicked towards Max as the big adult pushed up the brim of his wide hat and his gaze turned to steel. "Hang on." Fender held a hand up to Max, then spoke to Tacho. "We don't cause bingles, Tach, you know that."

Tacho pouted, hurt by Fender's tone. "Did this one," he sulked.

"Look," Max whispered, his ruined voice still capable of anger. "If you little dung-beetles have been ..."

Fender straightened himself, taller than Max, and glared. "Give me a minute, Max, alright?"

Max scowled in return but said nothing more. Fender bent his knees into a crouch, eye to eye with Tacho. "What do you mean, Tach?" He tried to sound cheerful.

Tacho grinned. "Me and Axle, we put a rock — a real big one — on the take-away. Rolled it out and bang! — we made the bingle."

"Shit!" Fender said as he stood. Max met his eyes.

The man's voice rasped in the heavy silence of the night, "You little bastard. You're gonna fuck things up for all of us."

"Max ... No ... We'll take care of it."

"What about these folks?" Max whispered, waving the sticky heart in Fender's face.

Fender held himself still, calming anger and fear.

"It's done, Max. We can't fix it. You know we never do this."

"You do now," Max spat.

"No. It's just the one — he's bad. We all know the law, okay. Don't say anything and we'll take care of him. We'll make sure everyone knows." Fender tried not to plead. "Okay?"

Max put the heart in his bag. "Okay. But I'll check — I'll find out."

"Thanks, Max." Fender offered his hand and the other man took it reluctantly. "None of us want the real law down here." He tried to smile.

"Just fix it, Fender," Max said as he left.

"Yep." Fender stared into the dark long after the Beater's truck had driven away.

The pack were gathered under the bridge, a small fire throwing shadows in the gloom. Axle was there, grinning now, sharing the food. Fender and his friends arrived at the fire quietly. No one noticed that Cam, the leader of the pack from the next scratch, stood silently behind them. Fender spat and approached Axle.

"Did you cause that bingle? Make it happen?" He spoke with authority rather than anger.

Axle flicked at glance towards Tacho, small and confused at Fender's side. "Yes," he answered simply, ready to argue his case.

The spanner in Fender's hand hit Axle's head with a crack. There was to be no discussion. Axle fell to the ground, rolling on the hard stone, his hands to his damaged face. Roll-bar put his knee to Axle's back and grabbed at his flailing hands.

"Axle has broken the law," Fender announced to his pack. "Beetles don't kill people — Bogs kill themselves."

Chassis deftly wrapped thick tape around Axle's wrists as Rollbar held them at his back. Fender dropped to the ground, tugging his hair from his eyes, and laid his face on the stone close to Axle's. "That's five people you killed, you Bog." He spat in Axle's face, then looked up at Roll-bar. "Get him ready."

Fender sat by the fire as his pack set to work on Axle. Tacho tugged at Fender's blanket. "What if he says he won't do it again?" he asked without meeting Fender's eyes.

"Saying sorry's not enough," Fender snarled.

Tacho raised his head. "But why?" he pleaded.

Fender gazed helplessly at the small boy, then reached a hand out to his shoulder. "Just say that one day you came home and you found that me and Chassis and Roll-bar and everyone, were all dead. And that Axle had killed us. How would you feel?"

"I'd feel bad," Tacho mumbled.

"What would you want to do to Axle?"

Tacho chewed his lip. "I'd want to hurt him."

"Would it help if he said he was sorry?"

Tacho shook his head.

"Well those Bogs today had people somewhere that love them as much as you love me and Chassis. It was wrong to kill them."

"But Bogs die all the time," Tacho whined.

Fender frowned. It was hard to understand death with so much of it around. "But they're accidents, Tach. Nobody meant to kill them and nobody meant to die. Killing people is the worst rule you can break. And that's what Axle did when he made the bingle happen. Do you understand?"

Tacho nodded and fell into Fender's arms, crying silently. With the child weeping in his arms, Fender found it hard to find his anger as he watched Axle being dragged to his feet. He saw the hatred in Axle's eyes, and it refueled his own. He stood, taking Tacho by the hand. "Come on," he commanded his pack.

The walk down the bank was slow. A twisted fanbelt had been attached to Axle's ankles, and it acted like a hobble on a horse, slowing him down, making it difficult to walk on the steep bank. And Axle would not look at his feet. He stared at Fender ceaselessly and relied on Roll-bar's grip to stop him from falling.

When the pack reached the sweep, the ground beneath them sparkling as the headlights glittered on the broken glass, Fender moved to stand beside Cam. "Make sure everybody knows," he said to the witness, then nodded once to Roll-bar.

The tape on Axle's wrists was not tight, and the fan belt was simply looped around his feet. Given time he could free himself with little trouble. But there was no time. Roll-bar pushed Axle into the stream and he was gone in seconds.

The Bogs did not stop. Axle was struck by at least three cars and not one of them even slowed. There was no squeal of tires and no change to the pattern of the stream. Axle simply disappeared. There were no Virgins on the take-away tonight. ❑

The Catafalque

By Scott M. Azmus

Art by Carol Heyer

The pyramids of Endebar rise a thousand leagues above the abyssal plain. Where their peaks break the placid sea surface, the evening sun sends bright flares ghosting starward. I stare and stare. I stare until the bright triangles burn deep. Burn. Burn until those shameful memories return.

My wrist twists. My fingers claw the air. I shudder with pain. Ah. Ah, yes. My arm. I forgot. Father nearly broke it the first day down.

Down on Denholm.

Gypsum sand hisses as it piles against my calves. My hand trembles with the heavy water bowl. The tiny Baleraphon leaf bear peers from the shade of my draped shirt. Its fibrous feelers probe cage walls and then the air. I prop elbow against knee to steady my hand.

Father's boots pound the sand. Drunk already. "Whole goddamned world's a fucking paradise, but *nooo* ... We crash in a goddamned salt basin! Fucking pilot. Cheap, piece of shit company yacht." The quas bottle sloshes and gurgles as he upends it to his lips.

I ease the water closer to the leaf bear. His feelers slide over the surface. They tickle the back of my hand. I try not to laugh. He backs away. His feelers ponder the moist air.

"Goddamned rescue party better get here soon."

The leaf bear grasps the bowl's brim. He arches and kisses the surface.

"What the hell are you doing?" Father's boot slams down on the cage. Wire mesh screeches and buckles. Water trickles into the sand. The leaf bear is silent in its death. "You stupid little shit! That water's for us."

He snags me before I can pivot away. My throat tightens. I can barely speak. "No, Dad, wait! Dad!"

He yanks me aloft. Flecks of spittle fly from his lips as he rages. I don't hear him. The world smells of quas and unwholesome sweat. I can't free my arm. Blood pounds in my ears. He shakes me. I twist in the air and he shakes me and shakes me and shakes me.

I feel a sharp pull and the twang of tendons in my arm. A sudden inexplicable looseness jars my elbow. A cold sear numbs my fingers. It pulses back through my elbow to my shoulder and up my neck. My jugular vibrates like a plucked chord. Father feels it too. As I revolve toward him, his face falls into the same cast it gets after he rapes his wife. Or one of my sisters.

"Stupid shit!" he yells. He throws me against a spire of trona-encrusted gypsum. I roll aside, breathless, and slink away.

I press my arm to my chest and breathe the borax dust as shallowly as I can. He staggers off, but returns with his tranquilizer rifle. Our escape module crashed with sixty-eight cases of illegal arms and liquor, one Imperial Vrin prisoner, and a wealth of contraband wildlife. But not one single charge for the weapons. I'd forgotten the tranquilizer gun.

Father's eyes gleam. He slides a silvery dart down the barrel, pumps the compression arm, and, *poompf!*, blows the cover off one of the llanak cages. I can't see the frightened llanak, but I imagine it cowering against the far corner. In my mind I see its eyes widen with terror and its cloven hooves clapping the cage bottom in pointless retreat. Father swigs from the bottle, pumps the rifle, and pushes it into the cage. When all but its polished stock disappears within, his arm jerks.

Poompf!

His laughter masks the muffled shot, but not the rattle of flailing legs and muscular neck.

He laughs and laughs.

He lunges at the last Hyperion sheep. "Stupid bastard. You're not getting any of my food, my drink."

Blood drips from its muzzle, but it simply stares at him. Trusting, like Mom always was. He fires the barbed dart at close range. The beast's eye explodes. Father's laugh is thick and harsh as he flicks gobs of flesh from his vest.

Next in line is the Vrin. Father flings her cage door open and shatters his empty bottle against it. The glass-aluminum ring hurts my ears. She blinks her minutely striated eyes in the sudden light.

"This is all your fault," father says.

The Vrin folds spindly arms across the red down of her chest. She cocks her head the way Mother used to. Without words she is saying, "Are you serious?"

Father rocks forward and spits. Some of it lands on his boot. He brushes it in the sand and

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CAROL HEYER

against the back of his camouflage trousers. He pulls another bottle from the big pocket above one knee. This he raises to the Vrin.

"I'd offer you some, but your *imperial* palate probably can't handle the hard stuff."

Her hushed voice reminds me of stringed instruments. Violin, sawratine, maybe a toomabore. "Barton, you are a fool. You destroy your only food source. You drink what might be of vital use later as a medicine. You are not equipped to survive."

A sneer flashes across Father's face. He mocks the Vrin while fighting to stand erect.

"'*You are not equipped to survive*.' Fuck you. Or should I say, 'Fuck you, your highness'?"

"Call me what you will. My sisters will avenge me."

"Sisters! There are no more Vrin. You're the last." He strokes the trigger guard as he lifts the weapon to his shoulder. "The very fucking last."

The Vrin gazes back through his sights. The feathers along her back flash iridescent blue. He will kill her. I can't watch. A sudden, driving rage thrusts me to my feet. I clutch my arm to my side and charge. The Vrin turns her stare on me. Her fleshy beak flexes in surprise.

"Yaaaah!" I yell, while fighting to keep from sliding in the sand.

Father turns as I slam into him. He rocks and nearly trips over his own boots. He swings around in a drunken spiral until able to fix me with his most hateful stare. His lips twitch and warp. His jaw bones flex under his cheeks. His eyes narrow, and a vein pulses between his eyebrows. The rifle barrel pans toward me.

The Vrin screeches. She steps to the sand. She faces the pounding sunlight and screeches again. The sound is so loud and so strange that, for an instant, Father and I pause.

On her third call, the barrel swings toward her.

I lunge. Too slow. The barrel looms large and bucks. My face stings. Hot barbs tear through my cheek and ear. I sail backward and land solidly in the burning mineral grit.

I hear Father swearing and pumping the barrel. I hear myself wail. The sand cradles me. I hear the metal on metal rush as father plunges another dart into the barrel.

Taloned digits grasp my ankles. A red blur blots the sky. My back shrieks agony as the sand rasps beneath it.

A baby cries. For the first time, I shift my gaze from the bright triangles to the veranda far below. My family is reacquainting themselves. All have returned for this occasion. The central residence and all the surrounding village swells with my progeny. All the babies are here. I enjoy watching them. The simplicity of their moods and actions pleases me.

The baby cries. One of my granddaughters coos to it. Its cries stretch on and on. She sings. The cries become intermittent wails. Finally, when it is quiet, I can hear the smiles in the adult voices as they congratulate themselves.

Someone sings. I wake on my belly and try to scrub dried tears from my eyes. My fingertips grate against a convex plate of desiccated bark. The singing wavers, drops to a hum, and stops. "Wait, young human. Do not touch."

That voice. I remember it as if from a dream. I pull my hand back. I can only open one eye. She is there. She is with me. She sketches a diagram on a sheet of translucent gypsum. Her look is wary. At her side, a crude bandage seeps with bright blood. I look away.

Whitish green and faded rose color the desolation. Striated towers of gypsum and ulexite cast the only natural shade upon the salt-encrusted pan. Dry, penetrating heat warps a distant stony scarp, above which I see a long dead forest. Withered roots claw the air and skeletal trees lean precariously. The cliff's base is a tangle of fallen carcasses.

I run my hand over the same dried wood from which the Vrin has built her shelter. It pulls the moisture right out of me. The dense grain whispers with the hushed voice of wind across autumn's last leaves. Curls of shaved wood carpet the floor. I look at her carving, but the picture is too faint to mean anything to me. Again, I look away.

We are perched upon a shallow terrace directly upslope from the crash site. Through the weave of dried timber, ragged bits of metal flash in the sunlight. I can't guess the distance. I wonder how Rob is doing down there. A twinge of guilt courses through me. Rob is only five.

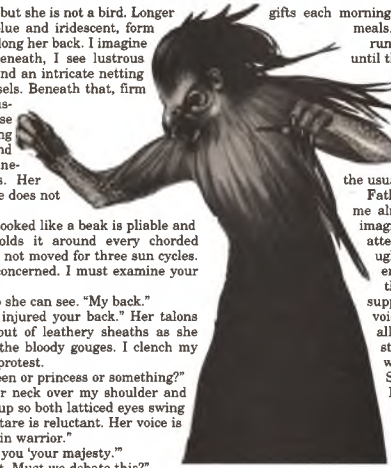
Stiffly, I sit up. I stare into the distance, at nothing. I want her to ask me what is bothering me, but dare not speak first. Her hiss of sudden pain pulls my gaze around. She bends double and her dark tongue laps at her wound. I fight a choking swell of guilt to say, "I'm sorry. My father doesn't mean to —"

"Hush." She looks up from her wound. Her flesh is dark, the exposed bone achingly white. I recognize the classic crescent slash of a Shierna blade. I see his favorite throwing knife half buried in the shavings. "We do not know one another well enough to exchange lies. Your father is a mercenary murderer. No more. You know this."

She's right. I know it. Father boasts of having the only Shierna blades this side of the Havvark Nebula.

I get my first real look at her as she cleans the wound further. Small feathers carpet her narrow

breast and belly, but she is not a bird. Longer feathers, these blue and iridescent, form long silky tufts along her back. I imagine them braided. Beneath, I see lustrous diamond scales and an intricate netting of tiny blood vessels. Beneath that, firm cords of agile muscle. Her eyes close with each dipping of her tongue and then flash with finely parallel lines. Her look says that she does not trust me.



What at first looked like a beak is pliable and rubbery. She molds it around every chorded sound. "You have not moved for three sun cycles. I was becoming concerned. I must examine your dorsal side."

I turn away so she can see. "My back."

"I am sorry I injured your back." Her talons whisper in and out of leathery sheaths as she picks sand from the bloody gouges. I clench my teeth and do not protest.

"Are you a queen or princess or something?"

She cranes her neck over my shoulder and sweeps her head up so both latticed eyes swing toward me. Her stare is reluctant. Her voice is proud. "I am a Vrin warrior."

"Father called you 'your majesty.'"

"He is ignorant. Must we debate this?"

"No."

She pushes herself up with the fluid grace of the consummate predator. I marvel at my lack of fright. "My name's Cal," I say.

Her neck feathers rise and her voice gains a musical trill I can't duplicate. "Pella."

"Is it true what you said: Father can't survive here?"

"I am not a visionary. He squanders much that would help your family survive."

"They're not my family."

"They are human. They are yours." She yanks and twists my arm. I do not cry out even though I can feel the ends of two bones meshing beneath my flesh. "Ah, you too are a warrior. Very good. We shall serve each other well."

We spend the next days trapping rodents and sweeping salt hoppers from their hiding places. Pella finds fresh water in the deep roots of withered plants. I collect impossibly light branches for the continued erection of our home and for her endless carving. Each night, at her insistence, we visit Father's camp to leave a portion of our gatherings.

Late one night, well past the darkest, coldest hour, I linger to explore. His wife sleeps in the far tent. I circle it. She does not stir, and I come next to my sisters' tent. Susan and Caroline sleep the dreamless sleep of the exhausted. They find our gifts each morning. They prepare all the meals. They keep the camp running. They will not rise until the sun bakes their tent.

Rob's shelter is next to last in line. I worry about him. I want to warn him, maybe ask him to come away with me. I pause at the tent flap. Voices; the usual propaganda.

Father stopped working on me almost a year ago, but I imagine Rob's face in rapt attention as he spins his ugly tales about our mother. I listen closer. Ah. It's the one about Mother's supposed adultery. Father's voice rises and falls with all the finesse of a master storyteller. At times he whispers some question. Sometimes he growls at Rob's naive answers. Through it all, I hear the slurring of his words and the calm, attentive breath of my little brother.

When Father finally leaves, I push into the tent. Rob is half asleep in his bundle of rough sheets. "Cal!" he shouts.

"Hush!" I freeze until sure I hear no footsteps. The single oil flame gutters and spits until I lace the entry flap shut. "Hey, Rob. You're not buying any of that guff, are you, pal?"

Tears well in his eyes. He carefully drags his arm from under the blanket. I follow the scars from his shoulder to his back. Not fresh, they're maybe two days old. My own back aches just looking at them. His stare is sullen, defiant.

I don't blame him for his resentment. "Come with me. The Vrin, her name's Pella, is real nice. We hunt, we build things, we even tell stories."

"Why don't you just come back?"

"Can't."

He turns from me, and the sheet shudders with dry, dry tears. After less than a minute, I carefully tuck the sheet tight under his chin. He's asleep.

I crawl to the storage tent. Its thin panels shudder with the winds of approaching dawn. It reeks of alcohol and —

My mouth waters. I pull aside several full liquor crates. I drop to my knees and scratch white powder from a crate of hidden rations. I tear my fingernails in sudden urgency. Jaw muscles tighten. I gulp saliva.

The crate slides open. I paw through it and back away. Bitter tears cloud the darkness. Two dozen emptied ration packs, one plastic spoon.

My fist closes on a jury-rigged screwdriver, bent and blunted. I jab it into another crate. Glass breaks, and texadrine laced quas pours into the thirsty sand.

I raise the weapon for another strike.

Susan screams. I rush to her shelter. Father did not go to his own bed. Caroline cowers under her cot. Susan fights Father as he pins her arms wide and drools a kiss across her face.

She screams and jabs her toes into his groin. Father backhands her to the floor. He roars and raises a lash. Shards of woven metal flash. I step forward. The lash curls around my forearm, stripping flesh as I pull it away. Father turns. He pales.

My voice breaks halfway through my words. "Go away!"

Father's breath is more than 100 proof. His words are thick and slurred. "Who the hell?" he asks. His palm knife whips by me and hits the tent flap hilt-first. I'm shaking hard, but step closer to him anyway. His fist swings. I duck under. His recovery is comic. He collapses onto his knees as if corkscrewing into the alkaline soil.

I look to my sisters. Their stares are hard, accusing, and hateful. Despite everything, they love him. Always have. I am about to haul him out of the tent when the pumping of the tranquilizer gun breaks the new silence.

I dive under the shelter's far end.

The shot never comes.

After watching Father's wife lead him away, I return to the storage tent. I spend the rest of the night opening liquor crates and each of the seventy-two bottles therein. Discarded caps litter the workbench. The floor is saturated. Salt hoppers push from the surface and gasp.

At dawn, I run from the campsite. Around mid-day, Father's anguished wail echoes from the surrounding cliffs. I hide from Pella's stare and continue doweling timbers together in the pattern of her instruction.

My great-granddaughter, little Elisandra, knocks softly on the arm of my rocking chair. I stare and stare until her wide, dark eyes come into focus.

"Momma say time eat," she says.

I trace a gnarled knuckle down her cheek. It is so smooth. So smooth. She leans into me like a cat and grins. I smell cinnamon tarts and honeyed shampoo. "Time eat."

"Thank you, darling," I say.

She pouts. "I not darling! *I* mousy."

I give her my deepest chuckle. I reach to tickle her. She laughs and twists and pins my hand to her frail chest. I hug her.

"I love you," I say.

She laughs and dances away. "Time eat."

My joints ache as I rise. But she is gone. I lift my cane, but then slump back into my chair. I lift the polished resinwood to my nose. The tang of the dry, dry wood anchors me in the past. I smile.

When not collecting knotty timbers or wood for Pella's carving, we collect stones from as far away as we can travel. The drag line chafes my chest and under my chin. The woven basket constantly catches on risers of ulexite and salt. They shatter and clink behind us. My toes rake the interbedded clay and white powdered trona. "Why do we have to go so far when there are these rocks all over?"

"These minerals do not even retain the heat of the day. And soon, very soon, we will be too busy to travel so far for what we need."

I dump my load in the shade of her rising structure. It has grown into the shape of an inverted bowl. As usual, her wary glare admonishes me not to follow her within.

The structure rises and rises. Sweat runs down my face as I bind a cross beam into place twenty, maybe thirty, meters above the ground. When finished, I squat on my ropy scaffold and look down into the camp. Even from this distance, I feel Father's baleful stare. A coppery flash at his lips tells me that I didn't find all of his liquor.

Pella pokes from a dark passage to announce that she requires more stones. "Be careful," she warns.

I grin. At least she doesn't add, "And don't get dirty."

As I pull the gritty cobbles from the scarp, their coolness surprises me. The dry, penetrating heat of the salt pan has not reached more than a few centimeters into the rock face. I wonder why. And I wonder why we never considered climbing the cliff. I shade my eyes to gaze up the stony incline. What's up there? Is all of Denholm so severe?

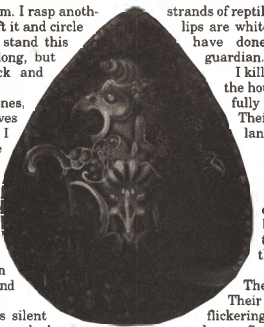
I drop another cobble into my shoulder harness. My thoughts drift while my fingers search out the next stone. Back on Endebar, Dad used to take us to the beach. We'd gather stones, and he'd throw out a block of wood or an empty bottle. Rob's rocks rarely made it to the water, but the rest of us would pretend the block was a competing merchant or a pirate running our blockade. Our stones became asteroids or missiles. We whistled and hissed and boomed sound effects until the shore sounded like a war zone. My shots always came the closest. After a while, I couldn't miss. That's when Dad took to blasting the things out of the water with his pistols. We stopped going to the beach after that.

Tears well, but do not slow my fingers. That was before Father seized control of the company.

Long before the quas seized him. I rasp another cobble from the strata. I heft it and circle my index finger around it. I stand this way for I don't know how long, but finally drop it into my sack and return to Pella.

She thanks me for the stones, but seems distracted and moves in a peculiarly ponderous way. I wonder if she is ill. I don't see her for days.

I bind the last timber into place and trace her diagrams. I gaze up at the flat-topped, crown-ridged dome. It is, as far as I can tell, complete. I am proud. The entire structure gleams in the noon sun. Where is Pella? I can't find her. I want to show off.



I crawl through the dome's silent labyrinth. Hot winds blow inward along the narrow passage. The sand warms beneath me as I journey to its core. I know I have entered the innermost chanber when the air flow leaves the ground to shoot straight up the center of Pella's dome. I sit with hands propped against my thighs. The room is no more than three meters across and, in the darkness, infinitely tall.

I waddle forward until my knees crash against something. My eyes are adjusting, but not fast enough. My fingers brush the cobbles. Pella has paved the floor with them. Hundreds radiate from a central pit. I count five bluntly tapered, football-shaped stones erected within. I move closer. Their speckled surface is pliant to my wondering touch. I move back. These are not stones, but eggs.

Eggs!

A skittering beside me warns that I am not the only visitor. A white scorpion crab regards me from the edge of the paving. It is as large as my doubled fists. The darkness magnifies the crisp clatter of its chitinous claws. I draw my legs under me as another blade-clawed scorpion heaves itself free of the sand.

I feel a kind of growl building in my chest. Both clatter forward while sidling to face me across the shallow pit. The first totters on the brink beside the eggs. One swipe and the leathery sacks will split to deliver a feast.

It watches me intently while its partner moves behind it. I pry a pair of paving stones from the warm sands. The first thumps behind them, and as their eyes swivel — oh so briefly — I leap the pit and grind the second down upon them. The cartilaginous crunch sends tremors deep into my guts.

Something else, much larger, moves across the room's far side. I prepare to dive upon it, but relax instead. It is Pella. Her feathers have molted and strands of reptilian skin hang all about her. Her lips are white and her talons cracked. "You have done well. You are the royal guardian."

I kill another dozen scorpions within the hour. This goes on for days. I carefully remove each from Pella's dome. Their arms and tails still jerk and lance even days after.

Sharp bladed shadows stalk me. The dusky sea breeze begins to chill. The pyramids flash brighter and brighter. As I seal the window, the trees whisper their secrets.

My daughters whisper, too. Their children sleep in their arms. Their husbands gather in the light of flickering fires. I smooth a quilt across my knees. Smoke settles on the breeze, tinting our sunset red.

Later, when the wind shifts, I crawl from my burrow to adjust our meager windbreak. I'm tired. I don't know how much longer I can guard the nest. Pella wanders out to stare at the star-speckled sky. I ask her how long until her eggs hatch.

Her cloak of half-shed skin sways with her shrug. "Your task is nearly concluded." Her tone pulls my gaze to her eyes. They are damp. I look past her. A landing craft streaks the night. Somewhere beyond, one of Father's starships watches and waits.

"Cal!" Rob runs toward us. "Cal!" He turns every few steps as if to assure himself that the landing craft is still descending. He stops at the edge of the dome and stares at Pella. It is not the first time he has seen her. He helped unload the cages when we first landed. But now he stares and with her slightest movement, he screams. He screams and races back toward the camp.

I follow him. The landing craft touches down. One of the survival shelters overturns in the downdraft.

I race from gypsum spire to gypsum spire and silently circle the camp. By the time I'm close enough to see clearly, a pilot's jacket hangs from father's shoulders. This is the closest I've seen him in months. He looks more frail and bent than I remember. He hefts a heavy autoblaster. He thumbs and clears the safety. The dull whine sets my teeth chattering. "Which starship? Who's in command?"

The landing craft pilot follows the motion of the weapon. "*Negotiator*, Sir. J.S. Halverson commanding."

"Fine, fine."

"We spotted your signal tower, or dome, or whatever, from low orbit. It's a miracle you all survived. Except ... well, I'm sorry about your older boy."

Father pins her with a long stare. "Don't be. He refused to submit to rationing and, late one night, the Vrin dragged him off and made a meal of him. We buried his bones in the dome's foundation on the third day down. Now —" He flips the autoblaster from hand to hand. "— I'll bury the fucking Vrin."

I race to meet Father halfway up the slope. He is alone. His blaster hums steadily. He stares past my scarred face, and his eyes flicker to and back from Pella's dome. This is the first time in years I've seen him sober.

"What the hell are you doing here? You're sure as hell not welcome to leave with us ..."

I'm still out of breath. Sweat stings my eyes. "I can't let you kill her."

He looks me up and down. His lips twist into a sneer. "Gone native, have you?" He swings the autoblaster at my head. I duck under, but its beam cleaves the air. I can't tell where it hits Pella's dome, because flames erupt from everywhere at once.

He kicks and I fold around his boot. I can't breathe. He laughs and, gun pointing aloft, trots to the only portion of the dome not yet ablaze.

I roll and gulp the desiccated air. When I get up, I shield my eyes and gaze to the top of the dome. He and Pella fight in a rush of meshed limbs. I run to the dome's base, but there is no handhold. I back away and trip over a forgotten pile of rocks. My hands close on them.

The first stone hits a meter short. The second arcs way over their heads. The third slams into Father's side, sending him toppling from the dome. He hits. I hear his breath gush from him.

"Pella!" I shout. She stands, her eyes even with the flame tips rising all around her. Smoke pours from the tunnels beneath. There's still a chance. I sprint for the nearest tunnel, but Father rises to block me. I drop and swing my legs behind his knees. He falls and rolls for cover.

"No!" I shout, but I can't stop him. He rolls into the crab pit. He screams each time their poisoned tails stab. My fingers coil around his forearm and I pull him clear. The scorpion crabs plop to the sand with their last trickles of venom. There is nothing I can do. I back away.

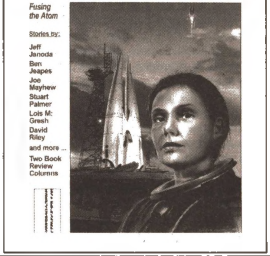
Flames crackle behind me. I look up. There is someone I *can* save. Pella.

Inside the dome, I leap from beam to beam. Three times the flames push me back, but I press on. At the top, Pella has erected a narrow, cross-shaped box. It is a Vrin coffin. It rests upon a raised platform on which I instantly recognize carvings of both human and Vrin life cycles. She stands beside it as if in prayer.

I charge toward her. She stops me. Her talons needle my chest. "You must go. This pyre will take me home, and the stones will retain enough heat to protect the eggs from pilferage. Your father's kind have destroyed an empire. You have given this world to the Vrin. Thank you."

She pushes me. I fall and fight the sand blast as the inferno sucks air from all sides. Later, after Rob welcomes me to the landing craft, we watch Pella's blaze all the way to orbit and all the way out of the system.

I look out across the veranda. The grandchildren are quiet. The family will not disturb me. The sun sets. I dream. The blaze brings new life to a dying world. It is beautiful. ❑



Our Next Issue

The next issue of *Aboriginal* will feature another cover by British artist Chris Moore and the following shqrt stories: "Locals," by Dennis Fisher; "A Girl in Every Universe," by Terry McGarry, who has appeared in several earlier issues; "Beating the Sweeps," by Carrie Martin; "Tryst," by Janis O'Connor; "Sundials," by Chuck Rothman, who has also appeared in a number of previous issues; and "The Satini Solution," by Kevin M. Carr. Janis and Kevin have also appeared in previous issues.

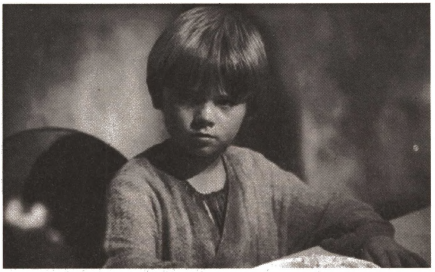
We will also have our usual assortment of book reviews, Robert A. Metzger's science column, and another film preview column by Marvin Kaye, who joined us with this issue to share his insights.

Trekking Toward the Phantom Empire

On May 21, when George Lucas releases *The Phantom Menace*, Episode I of *Star Wars* and surely the longest- and most eagerly-awaited movie in film history, we will not only meet young Anakin Skywalker before he turns to the Dark Side of the Force, we will begin to see, in this and subsequent prequels, the phantom rise of the sinister Empire that comes tumbling down at the close of Episode VI.

Modified rapture, as Nanki-Poo exclaims in *The Mikado*. I liked the first *Star Wars*, Episode IV: *A New Hope*, but it took the fifth and sixth installments to turn me into a fanatical devotee because, as I wrote in a column in 1987, I came to admire "Lucas's sincere attempt to fashion myths deeper than the usual mental bubble gum, and without the pomp and pretension that often accompanies 'message' science-fantasy." At the same time, I'm dismayed that it's taken so long for Lucas to get around to continuing his epic — especially since he recently revealed, in an interview in *Vanity Fair*, that he has decided to scrap plans to make Episodes VII through IX.

If Lucas had observed his original timetable, sans "Indiana Jones," which I would have gladly sacrificed for the rest of *Star Wars*, we might have had the entire nine-chapter saga by 2001, or thereabouts. The arithmetic was staggering: two or three years to make each film, so I predicted that a more mature Lucas would change his mind about devoting more than twenty years to a project conceived in his youth.



The future Darth Vader ...

I'm not happy to be right. I never thought there was much point, except in box office activity, to go back in time and find out how that galaxy long, long ago got to be the way it was in the opening reel of *A New Hope*. The film told us as much back-story as we needed to know. Anything else, I thought in 1987, had to be dramatic anticlimax.

Don't get me wrong; I'll be in line to see *The Phantom Menace* and love it. But the structural arc of this film and its two follow-ups will necessarily depend less on surprise than the pleasure of recognition (young Ben Kenobi, R2D2, the building of C3PO, and a more ambulatory Yoda) and a careful concealment of events to come. Aesthetically, Lucas has delineated the first trilogy as Anakin Skywalker's fall from grace, with the familiar fourth through sixth episodes ultimately devoted to his spiritual resurrection.

But what happens AFTER the Rebellion succeeds? Did the Emperor really burn to a crisp? Frankly, I suspected it was a sorcerer's death and that he, like Sauron in *Lord of the Rings*, would go somewhere horrible to gather his dark energy and rise again.

Please, Mr. Lucas, you have been keeping your story secret for a dozen years. If you're not going to film the last trilogy, and if you won't let anyone else do it, *tell us what you had in mind!*

As I watched coming attractions before a screening of *Virus*, it struck me how many features under development are science-fiction or fantasy. After the film was over and the credits went crawling up the screen, I also noticed how many of them are based on comic books. That's part of the reason I called this column "Trekking Toward the Phantom Empire." Some of you may remember a 1935 science-fictional serial starring Gene Autry, *The Phantom Empire*. It, and a follow-up with

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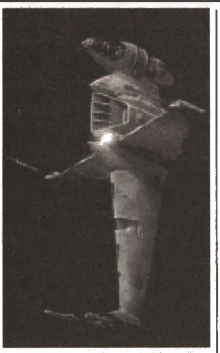
Ray "Crash" Corrigan, *The Undersea Kingdom*, offered the film analogue of comic book stories: vivid, larger than life characters; broad, exciting, improbable plots; gimmicks galore, the stuff of Flash Gordon and Buck Rogers and, of course, *Star Wars* and *Star Trek* — except that the latter started as media entertainment; the comic books came later, and that may be one of the reasons why "Trek" and "Wars" are so much better than many of the films that were generated from comics.

No prejudice, I swear! Once upon a time some of my best friends were comic books, and even now I still hang onto my 107 issues of the original *Star Wars* series, as well as *Captain Marvel*, he of the Shazam!, and the Dell *Pogo* comics (still missing two issues). But when the bulk of our entertainment fare consists of broad characters without much psychological depth linked to loud, noisy, admittedly clever plots, I ask, is this *all?* Don't members of the younger audience also crave something as mature as the science-fantasy they read in genre periodicals? Not as a substitute; I salute and cheer the diversity, but if you go into a restaurant that serves the same few spicy dishes day after day, you're probably going to dine out at a few other places. Why doesn't the same principle apply to movies?

It's interesting to me that some reviewers criticized the recent *Star Trek: Insurrection* as just a feature-length episode of *The Next Generation*. That's a negative? The character interplay, plot ideas and ethical impact of TNG in my view have always been light years ahead of the original *Star Trek*. The latest episode, *Insurrection*, substitutes a softer tone for special effects during much of the film, with some delicious humor (my favorite moment, Data and Jean-Luc singing Gilbert and Sullivan), simple family values (right-wing Republicans, take



A Rebel B-wing enters the fray

note! if any are reading this), and a moving, wholly integrated romantic interest for Picard — and, damn the adolescents in the audience, *what would it have hurt to let them kiss?*! Plus at the wrap-up, special effects and a white-knuckle final countdown. If for some reason you stayed away, rent the videotape and enjoy!

By press time, release dates had not been announced by Warner Brothers for *The Matrix* or by Centropolis Streamline/Columbia Pictures for *The 13th Floor*, though both were expected to be in the theatres by late spring. The films bear some conceptual similarity. *The Matrix*, starring Keanu Reeves, Carrie-Anne Moss, and Laurence Fishburne, and written and directed by Andy and Larry Wachowski, is the story of a 22nd-Century computer hacker enlisted by a band of freedom fighters to battle computers that control mankind (fond memories of D. F. Jones's *Colossus: The Forbin Project*). The machines keep their human slaves in a passive state by involving them in a virtual-reality universe that appears to them as, guess what? the world of the 20th Century. So we're an illusion ... or, as Charles Fort once remarked, "I think we're property."

A different approach to the same philosophical issue (which may be traced back to Plato or, in this century, to Jean Cocteau's masterpiece, *Orpheus*, in which it is suggested that we are merely God's dreams ... his *bad* dreams ...) may be found in The *13th Floor*, which is based on the Daniel F. Galouye novel *Simulacron-3*. Starring Craig Bierko, Vincent D'Onofrio, and Gretchen Mol, and directed by Josef Rusnak, *The 13th Floor* is a noirish mystery revolving around the death of a business tycoon and entrepreneur with a double life in two parallel worlds, 1937 and the present, and one of them (both of them?) may be illusion. Or not ... the studio is keeping the story secret, though a theatrical trailer hints strongly that our world may be a holodeck.

Another virtual-reality spin is embodied in *eXistenZ*, a science-fiction film written and directed by the estimable David Cronenberg (*Dead Ringers*, *Scanners*, and the second version of *The Fly*), and produced by Alliance Films (Canada) and Dimensions Films. Starring Jennifer Jason Leigh, Ian Holm, and Rosemary Harris, *eXistenZ* involves future interactive game designers whose virtual-reality games are complex and deadly.

Another film without a release date but with a Coming Attractions trailer running in the theatres is the Dreamworks and Roth/Arnold Productions remake of Shirley Jackson's psychological fantasy, *The Haunting of Hill House*, first made by Robert Wise in 1963 with Julie Harris and Claire Bloom. That version, *The Haunting*, is, I feel, one of the three best haunted house films ever made, the others being *The Innocents* and *The Uninvited*. Wise's *The Haunting* is a tale of supernatural possession, though the Jackson novel suggests that it is really a story of a haunted young woman whose own death-

wish leads her to bond with the house. This ambiguity is difficult, though not impossible, to suggest as part of a film's "objective reality." The Wise version benefited from one of the cinema's greatest special effects — *black and white*. However, the exterior of Hill House in the trailer, though in color, is appropriately eerie and menacing. Let us hope that director Jan De Bont appreciates the problem. It *can* be solved: Walt Disney knew how (the banshee in *Darby O'Gill and the Little People* is one of the few times I shut my eyes in a movie!), and they did amazingly sinister things in color in the late, lamented TV series, *American Gothic*, though Stanley Kubrick wisely elected to set the end sequence of *The Shining* in a maze shot in a manner to make it look almost black and white, a technique similar to the climactic murder in Eisenstein's *Ivan the Terrible, Part Two*.

Deep Blue Sea, a Warner Brothers film directed by Renny Harlin and starring Samuel L. Jackson, sounds like a science-fictional version of *Jaws*. Biomedical engineers work to create a new species of shark that is bigger and smarter and more vicious than Mother Nature's originals. These "uebersharks" will be kept corraled in an oceanic zone where game fishermen can come to catch them. Of course, the zone is designed so that the supersharks can never escape from it. Uh-huh ... and remember that big wooden wall in *King Kong* ... ?

A raft of comedies are in the works or about to be released. At press time, two of the three parts of an anthology film, *Alien Love Triangle*, were completed; the premise has to do with aliens visiting earth to learn things about love and sex (they couldn't find any place in the galaxy more mature?!). The talent assembled is indeed promising: a cast that features Kenneth Branagh, Heather Graham, and Courteney Cox (she could read the phone book, and I'd be a captive audience!), with Danny Boyle and that marvelous Scottish filmmaker Bill Forsyth (*Local Hero*, etc.) directing. From Universal/Tribeca comes *The Adventures of Rocky and Bullwinkle*, this time, thankfully, an animated feature, and not one of those peculiar attempts to turn a cartoon into a "real-life" version like *Popeye*, or, more to the point, the odd 1992 *Boris and Natasha: The Movie* (as if it could have been mistaken for the TV series).

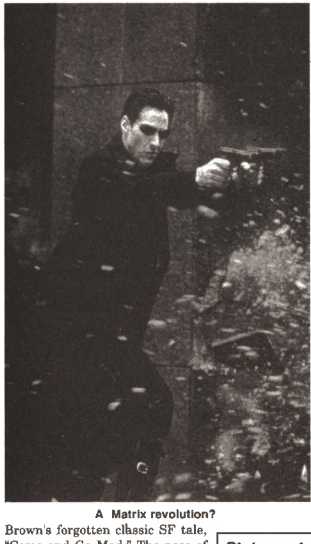
The Queen refuses to yield

Irreverence is the keynote for *Dogma*, a Miramax/View Askew comedy/fantasy that, though completed, has not been scheduled for release — which sounds promising to me in terms of studio squeamishness. Bearing distant echoes of Parke Godwin's novel *Waiting for the Galactic Bus*, it chronicles the efforts of two rebel angels with the provocative names of Loki (Matt Damon) and Bartleby (Ben Affleck) to reenter Heaven with a scheme that will, *en passant*, bring about the end of the world. Kevin Smith, who wrote and is directing *Dogma*, says that his Catholic upbringing contributed to his desire to create the film.

Another kind of irreverence: Universal Pictures and Summit Entertainment, in conjunction with Sugar Creek Productions, are working on a cinematic adaptation of Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.'s *Breakfast of Champions*. Vonnegut on film has had ups and downs, but this one does boast a promising cast: Bruce Willis as Dwayne Hoover, the midwestern car dealer hooked on the science-fiction novels of the legendary Kilgore Trout, to be played by Albert Finney; also in the cast are Nick Nolte and Barbara Hershey. Willis reveals his artistic taste; he coproduced, reportedly raising the lion's share of the budget himself. Good luck, Bruce! Next, how about *The Sirens of Titan*?

Department of Worthwhile Movies that May Have Escaped Your Notice

VCR ALERT: A remarkable first film is now available in videotape format at Blockbuster Video and similar stores. Artisan Entertainment's *Pi* (actually the mathematical symbol) is a first film written and directed by Darren Aronofsky, who received the Best Director award for it at the 1998 Sundance Film Festival. "A bizarre and ingeniously paranoid thriller" is what the *New York Times* said of *Pi*, and Siskel & Ebert gave it two thumbs up. Still, this mesmerizing black and white tour de force is a demanding cinematic experience. A deft mixture of quasi-science-fiction, fantasy, and pure paranoia, *Pi* is the story of a tormented young man who, as a child, stared straight into the sun, and has ever after suffered headaches and hallucinations (but are they?) and has a capacity for rapid mental calculation akin to Dustin Hoffman's autistic "Rain Man." His inward quest leads him to what may be the central structural riddle of creation itself, and some of the visuals reminded me of Fredric



A Matrix revolution?

though it is, ultimately, a fantasy, which is why I am mentioning it here. A brilliantly conceived and constructed exercise in stream-of-consciousness, it came out in 1971, and some American critics put it on the list of the ten worst films of the year. I suspect had it been made in France, the same critics would have hailed it as one of the year's best. It does show up occasionally on college campuses, where it enjoys a cult following. Tangential, admittedly, to this column, but I love this film and urge anyone with a taste for art films to seek it out if and when it shows up on some film retrospective.

And now, to lower the tone — there's also a cult following, at least on the East Coast where I trundled the videotape from convention to convention, for Beverly Penberthy's *Bloodsucking Pharaohs in Pittsburgh*, a feminist (sort of) slasher (kind of) over-the-top science-fantasy horror farce. Though certainly flawed, there are enough wonderful performances and Mad Comics-level twists in it to make it worth renting or buying at your neighborhood (WELL-STOCKED) video store. There's also one lousy acting job in it, and a gross-out scene in an autopsy lab that I'd rather forget (though it got lots of laughs at Philcon). On the other hand, you'll never forget Anubis. My editor friend at Bantam Doubleday Dell, Pat LoBrutto, delivered the ultimate review when he watched it with me several years ago at a Lunacon in Rye, New York. "Marv," he said, "it's everything you ever said it was — *and less!*" ❑

Brown's forgotten classic SF tale, "Come and Go Mad." The pace of *Pi* is alternately maddening and spellbinding; viewers in search of a simple linear plot better steer clear of it, but if you're not afraid of a genre-rooted art film, *Pi* is a truly haunting experience.

I recently renewed an old acquaintanceship with Henry Jaglom, my candidate for America's greatest maverick film producer (sorry, I've always been lukewarm about *Citizen Kane*; ask me why another time). Henry graciously sent me a videotape, unfortunately not in the stores, of his first film, *A Safe Place*, a minor masterpiece starring Tuesday Weld, Philip Proctor, Jack Nicholson, and none other than Orson Welles as a down-and-out magician who wishes to do one great piece of real magic, and finally succeeds. *A Safe Place* is not a genre film,

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Books and Book Product

"What surprises me the most," my friend said, surveying a vast array of current science fiction and fantasy on a dealer's table at Philcon, "is how many of these I wouldn't dream of reading."

"We've turned into reactionary old farts," I said. "And proud of it."

Neither one of us was quite kidding. We are both in our forties, both long-time fans. I, at least, grew up in fandom. I was writing book reviews (none of which I would want reprinted today) for fanzines when I was sixteen. The great majority of literary people I've met through fandom (although not all of them) have been science fiction people. Fandom was my primary portal, not merely to the professional world, but to the adult world. Deny it as you may, insist that it is "Just a Goddamn Hobby" (FIJAGH for short, the traditional fannish counterblast to FIAWOL, or "Fandom is a way of life!"), it can be, for a lot of us (I remember Don Wollheim articulating this quite clearly once), quite a bit more. I met my wife in fandom. I made most of my friends there. It is the source of my livelihood. I practically expect to be buried in fandom — in the sense that my lifelong accumulations of books, magazines, manuscripts, etc. will be dispersed "in the family," so to speak. (Which is why, to this day, the private research collections in our field vastly outrank those of universities.) I can be certain that had Lin Carter not written the "Our Man in Fandom" article series in *Worlds of If* in the late '60s, my whole life would have been quite different.

Rating System

☆☆☆☆☆	Outstanding
☆☆☆☆	Very Good
☆☆☆	Good
☆☆	Fair
☆	Poor

Okay, I'm a Lifer. I admit it. The point I am grasping for is that if two presumed Lifers ("FIAWOL!") can look at a bunch of science fiction books and agree that they wouldn't dream of reading most of them, then something is very, very wrong with science fiction.

"Well, first you eliminate the media fiction," I said. "*Locus* recently announced that 51% of all books in the field in 1997 were media fiction. Science fiction has become a merchandising franchise. Toys, books, T-shirts, they're all the same."

"The rest of it seems to be endless fantasy series," my friend went on.

We mourned the passing of the Monology.

"Then you eliminate the sharecrops, franchises, suspect collaborations with famous dead (or not quite dead, or just lazy) authors," I said.

"That doesn't leave very much," said my friend.

"No, but there *are* real books out there. It's a niche market. Original SF novels, thought up by their own authors. Maybe 20% of the total."

We went on a bit further in this vein. I speculated on whether the field has grown at all in the time we two had been reading it. If you eliminate all that chaff, are there more "real books" being published now than there were in the 1960s? I'm not really sure. What I can be sure of is that in those days the occasional "media fiction" book, whether it was Theodore Sturgeon's *Voyage to the Bottom of the Sea* novel or even a whole series of James Blish *Star Trek* volumes, was like the little black spot on your lip you don't pay any attention to until it metastasizes and gobbles you up. I, at least, did not foresee this.

What we're talking about, what my friend and I had developed an almost subconscious mechanism for blotting out, are what some people have jokingly called *book product*, as in "cheese product." Looks like cheese. Smells vaguely like cheese. Tastes a little bit like cheese. But it isn't cheese.

This is not to say that, suddenly, vile hacks have taken over the field which was once a pristine preserve of Sensitive Artists who happily produced Masterpieces. There have always been hacks. The basic equation in any area of publishing is that the ideal writer (from the publisher's point of view) is one who produces, every eighteen months or so, another book which will sell reliably to the same audience as the last one. It doesn't matter if it's Harlequin Romances or Joyce Carol Oates. That reliability is the driving factor. "Quality" or "originality" is only one of many factors which may predict sales figures. (Leading to the paradox that frequently what the publishers want is a book that is "original" just like the last one.)

But this reliability doesn't necessarily stem from an audience built up by the individual writer. Sure, a Joyce Carol Oates book will sell to the audience Ms. Oates has built for herself, but if that audience can come *already prefabricated*, then all the better, from the publisher's point of view. If that audience can be built up through other media, such as, say, a TV show which is seen by millions of people *every day*, that is *much* more reliable. It doesn't matter who writes such a book. Any competent verbal technician will do. In fact, a writer lacking individuality or recognizable style will have a certain advantage. He can fit in anywhere. Could you

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imagine, say, Avram Davidson writing a *Star Trek* novel? (On the immediate downside of this, if the writer demands too much in money or rights, he can be easily replaced by another verbal-tech, who will be just as quickly forgotten when *he* gets replaced.)

This is an old, old conflict. It certainly predates the invention of television. The hacks who wrote for the hero pulps of the '30s and '40s (*Doc Savage, The Shadow, Captain Future*, or whole issues of formula "weird menace" stories for the likes of *Terror Tales*) were doing the same thing. The *product* they produced is sometimes remembered in the nostalgia market, but the writers themselves are completely inconsequential. Before them, the phenomenon ran its course in dime-novels.

What matters, what my friend and I were searching for amid all that "product," are the genuine, individual books. They still exist. "No system of oppression is perfect," George Zebrowski said recently in an interview I did with him, as we were talking about this very thing. The good stuff does sneak through.

But today it is in the distinct minority. In fact, I've noticed that many of the book-like objects I get in the mail these days aren't even fiction. They're *Deep Space Nine Plumbing Manual* or *The Really, Really Unauthorized History of The X-Files* or, most absurd of them all, Terry J. Erdmann's *The Tribble Handbook* (Pocket Books, 1998, 30 pp., $5.00), which is the literary equivalent of a Cracker Jack prize, something you could flip through in five minutes while on the toilet (but far, far less interesting than the *Uncle John's Bathroom Reader* series, which I recommend), a compilation of trivia and a few jokes. You can even find out what the tribbles' Kevin Bacon number is on page 9.

But trees died for this? The thing came all by itself, rushed to me by Priority Mail, in an oversized mailer with three dollars' worth of postage on it (it weighs about an ounce; no more than 55 cents first class) as if it were vitally important that I review it.

Note that it sells for as much as a new, 300-page novel, for all that the total written content could probably be squeezed onto the back of a postcard.

Somewhere there is a publishing accountant who will proudly point to *The Tribble Handbook* as a successful "title." He probably thinks he's in the book business, too.

While we're on the subject, a word or two about David Eddings. This isn't fair, I know. I haven't actually read any of Mr. Eddings's endless fantasy series (the very thing my friend had learned to avoid) because I've never seen any indication that they are worth reading. But I glanced into David and Leigh Eddings's *The Rivan Codex* (Del Rey, 1998, 394 pp., hardcover, $27.50) largely because somebody passed me a quote from it on the Internet, which I find on the last page of this bookoid. (*The Rivan Codex* is an appendix to Mr. Eddings's various novel series, being the "ancient texts" of his fantasy world, gospels, histories, etc.) The quote that interested me was this: "My personal favorite fantasy author is Lord Dunsany. He teaches me humility, since he can do more in four pages than I can do in four hundred."

Ah, I thought, maybe we have something in common, for all Mr. Eddings has a reputation of being the next best thing to Terry Brooks.

But then I read his introduction, which is just appalling. Not only has he glibly reduced the epic fantasy novel to a formula as rigid as that of any Harlequin Romance (and believe me, I know whereof I speak; not that I have read Harlequin Romances, but I have a copy of their guidelines, which I would quote here, save that the Harlequin guidelines are things of such insidious terror that stouter literary hearts than mine would surely shatter) — not only has he done that, but then he comes out and says:

> Are you up for some honesty here? Genre fiction is writing that's done for money. Great art doesn't do all that well in a commercial society. Nothing that Franz Kafka ever wrote ever appeared in print while he was alive. *Miss Lonelyhearts* sank without a ripple. Great literary art is difficult to read because you have to think when you read it, and most people would rather not. (p.18)

Spoken like a true acolyte of Lester del Rey, which is why those of us who love fantasy, who grew up on the Ballantine Adult Fantasy Series, have always reviled the name of del Rey as the traitor who sold out to the Forces of Darkness.

Eddings is wrong about Kafka, by the way. (A few things were published in his lifetime. Kafka, suicidally neurotic, wanted no more copies printed, although he didn't go so far as to demand that copies already in somebody's possession be destroyed.) As for the commercial viability of Great Art, I can only say I'd rather have the royalties from *Hamlet* or *Moby Dick* or, yes, *Miss Lonelyhearts* than I would those of the collected works of David Eddings, especially as I near retirement age. I hope he invests his current earnings wisely.

Maybe it is naively idealistic of me, but while I don't assume that everyone who aspires to Great Art (or even pretty good art) necessarily achieves it, I *do not* believe that it can be achieved by writers who take the attitude of Mr. Eddings. You have to at least *try*. The fantasy (or science fiction, or any kind of) writers who matter were all ones who were perfectly willing to challenge their readers. Tolkien, Peake, Dunsany, C.S. Lewis, Charles Finney, James Branch Cabell, Fritz Leiber, etc., etc. all took delight in producing works that make us feel and think new things. That's why their books are not replaceable by other bits of "book product." They wrote real books. Mr. Eddings, who apparently has a background in literature, has apparently been exposed to real books, and may even have had such "tendencies" at one time, but he has, to the gratitude of the book-product industry, overcome them.

Now I admit I'm being a little unfair here, and fans of *The Belgariad* et al. are going to want *The Rivan Codex* in the same way that some people are going to want *The Tribble Handbook*, but I remain appalled and offended by

that introduction, precisely because I am working in this area myself and I see Mr. Eddings as Part Of The Problem. I leave him with a quote from his favorite writer, Lord Dunsany, from a 1918 essay called "Artist and Tradesman." Dunsany is giving advice to playwrights:

> Now there are two kinds of playwrights (indeed all writers are divided into two kinds, quite distinct) — tradesmen and artists.
>
> The first are more numerous, the more rich; they are the rulers of the time. (I mean by tradesmen the men whose inspiration is money.) To them I would say, "Try painting pieces of lead yellow and selling them in the street as gold bricks." Money can be had that way . . . it is *more honest* to sell lead for gold than to sell stale phrases as thought, and false conventions as emotion. They are the men whose disinterested purpose is to provide "what the public wants"; they always plagiarize the play that pleased the basest part of the mind of the greatest number last year . . .
>
> But artists are the rulers of the generations.
>
> (*The Ghosts of the Heaviside Layer*, Owlswick Press, 1980, p. 177.)

Enough of this dreary stuff. Let's look at some real books:

The High House
By James Stoddard
Warner/Aspect, 1998
321 pp., $6.50

This one came to my attention at the recommendation of the cover artist, Bob Eggleton, who described it as "a really brilliant, Lovecraftian sort of book." I'd say not quite brilliant, and it's the Lovecraft of "The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath," but in Mr. Stoddard I find a true kindred spirit. Here's someone who remembers what fantasy was before it was turned into product, and has lovingly collected all the Ballantine Adult Fantasy volumes edited by Lin Carter, read them again and again, and now written a deliberate *hommage*, openly acknowledged as such, and dedicated to the late Mr. Carter, who was, by the way, an awful writer; but as an editor his reputation just grows and grows.

Carter would, I think, have been delighted with Stoddard's first novel, not merely because of the tribute and the numerous in-references, or because the wonder-seeking protagonist is named Carter. He would have recognized that Stoddard has the voice that good fantasy requires and can certainly hear the music. At least he knows that there is music:

> The High House, Evenmere, that lifts its gambled roofs among tall hills overlooking a country of ivy and hawthorn and blackberries sweet but small as the end of a child's finger, has seldom been seen by ordinary men. Those who come there do so not by chance, and those who dwell there abide long within its dark halls, seldom venturing down the twisting roads to the habitations of men . . .
>
> (p.1)

Now this is, admittedly, something of a "good parts" novel, quite bookish, with obvious bows to just about everything published under the sign of the Unicorn Head, 1969-74. The characters even read or make allusions to *The Well At the World's End* or *The Three Impostors*. Sometimes the name-dropping moves close to parody:

> .. Carter said, "Father used to tell me marvelous stories of countries like this. As a child, I thought them only make-believe."
>
> Duskin smiled. "I remember. Of Numinor and Poseidonis, enchanted kingdoms both lost to the ocean's depth. In my mind I can still see the tall princes, chalk-white of skin, in mail of bronze, the sun gleaming on their shields."
>
> "Do you recall Lud-in-the-Mist?"
>
> Duskin grinned. "It was a village lying just beyond the Debatable Hills, where waited Fairyland."
>
> "Was Alveric prince there?"
>
> "No, they had no prince. You're thinking of the story of the witch Zirroonderel."
>
> "Ah, you're right!"
>
> "And what about Aviathar, the warrior of Khymyrium, how he came to Glasgerd and the things he did there?"
>
> (p. 243)

That last is a multiple in-joke, referring to the "artistic" epic Lin Carter himself always promised, but failed to write beyond a few fragments.

But there *is* something special here. Stoddard isn't just repeating all the elements he liked or which worked. I *hope* he understands that this delicate balancing act, half loving pastiche and half original creation, is something he can do only once, and that if he tries to turn it into a ten-volume series, he'll grow up to be David Eddings. For the time being, at least, he's been able to assimilate the feelings the right kind of reader gets from the right kind of book, then go on to add to the effect rather than merely echo. His hero, Carter Anderson, scion of the decidedly Gormenghastine house of Evenmere, which exists halfway in our world (so the hero can go away to college and apparently read old Ballantine paperbacks), but also in no known country and halfway into Dream, journeys like a C.S. Lewis or George MacDonald character through magic doors and passageways, into archetypal places, some of them sunlit, some of them enshadowed, all of them, whole countries, implied worlds, existing within the corridors of the house. There's a wise and ancient dinosaur in the attic, man-eating furniture in the basement, clocks that must be kept wound; and somehow the infinite, almost Borgesian house *is* the universe; and if the Forces of Darkness ("anarchists," recalling *The Man Who Was Thursday*) disrupt the delicate mechanism, the universe itself will end.

The other pervasive influence is that of John Bellairs's *The Face in the Frost* (not part of the Ballantine series, but brought to our attention by Lin Carter in his book about fantasy, *Imaginary Worlds*). Stoddard repeats one of Bellairs's jokes, but, more important, has learned from Bellairs (as, I admit, I did when writing *The Shattered Goddess* — steal from the best; at least it shows you have good taste) how to make everything shadowy and uncertain, so that, sometimes, people don't have faces, and furniture turns into something else, and the narrative follows dream logic without losing plot logic entirely.

Recommended, for a special sort

of reader. I think on the basis of this review, you know who you are.

Rating: ☆☆☆☆

Starfarers
By Poul Anderson
Tor Books, 1998
383 pp., $25.95

I've found some of Poul Anderson's recent science fiction novels problematic. I respect them more than I enjoy them. This is not because they are "difficult" in the David Eddings sense. Anderson is certainly unafraid of making his readers think, and he has a readership which rather enjoys that sort of thing; but it's because of actual novelist failings that drag down sensitivity and ambition.

The problem is this: Remember Anderson's now classic *Tau Zero*? I am sure you do, and vividly. It was a serial in the first two issues of *Galaxy* I ever read. *Tau Zero* has a scope very few writers have ever topped. It's about a spaceship that takes off at relativistic velocities. The accelerators get stuck. The spaceship proceeds, closer and closer to lightspeed, shipboard time so slowed down that Earth has long since perished, a passage through a galaxy (which might have taken half a million years, outside time) is perceived as a bump, and ultimately the spaceship outlasts the death and rebirth of the universe itself. It's real sense-of-wonder stuff of the highest order. But I ask you: Can you remember any of the characters? I think there was a captain, who had a despairing love affair with somebody, but, frankly, no.

Now in *Starfarers* we have the story of another voyage into deep space-and-time, a first-contact mission that will take 120,000 years to reach the other side of the galaxy and meet a race that at least *used to be there*. I find in Anderson a sense that's otherwise quite rare in contemporary science fiction that such a distance as 120,000 light years is an unfathomable abyss, rather than something you can just zip across in a few days aboard the Starship *Enterprise*. In Anderson's work, the universe has not been totally domesticated, and that makes him compelling, because the real universe never will be. He can also evoke wonder from the perception that people who take interstellar voyages will become a folk of their own, living on a time-scale quite apart from planet-bound people. Their memories and culture become distinctly different, as the Earth and other familiar worlds become stranger and stranger each time they stop by for a visit and "home" survives only in memory. Chapter 12 is a beautiful tribute to this sort of memory, almost a poem, like the young Ray Bradbury at the top of his form.

But I can't tell the characters apart. There's no actual plot, just a series of events that progress like a documentary, as new worlds are discovered, the Starfarer culture develops, etc., providing much sweep and stately grandeur, but little time for the characters to rise to emotional crises and come alive. So for all of its great science-fictional virtues, the novelistic shortcomings make *Starfarers* tough going after a while.

But I'm glad it's there. Anderson still feels the wonder of the vastness of the universe, and he can make you feel it, too.

Rating: ☆☆ 1/2

Noted:

Ahmed and the Oblivion Machines
By Ray Bradbury
Avon, 1998
unpaginated (appx. 60 pp.), $14.00

Ahmed is a twelve-year-old Arab boy, not much of a Muslim apparently, who falls off his camel, gets lost, and meets Gonn the Magnificent, a "god" who teaches him to fly (and wears flying goggles in the illustrations by Chris Lane), who lectures him at great length about freedom, imagination, flight, etc., and leaves the boy fixated on airplanes. Dare I suggest this doesn't make a whole lot of aesthetic/allegorical sense? Why the vaguely Arabian Nights setting, with airplanes? How do all these pieces hang together? Bradbury's shout-off-the-page enthusiasm carries us along, but it really doesn't seem to mean anything. Bradbury has always been a great favorite of mine, but I have to admit this is nowhere near his best. It's designed as a gift book for children. Maybe the kids will like it, but not very much, I suspect. Kids like *story*, rather than being shouted at, no matter how friendly the voice may be.

Rating: ☆☆

Two from Arkham House

Arkham House, the legendary small press founded in 1939 to perpetuate the works of H.P. Lovecraft, was seen by many of its devotees to have jumped the tracks in the past twenty years when editor Jim Turner steered it away from *Weird Tales* and the pulp era and largely away from horror altogether, publishing excellent volumes by Lucius Shepard, Michael Bishop, Nancy Kress, Michael Swanwick, Greg Bear, and numerous others with nary a drop of eldritch ichor in their prose. Well, now Turner has gone on to found his own Golden Gryphon Press, which publishes all the books he would have done from Arkham House, so nothing is lost, while post-Turner management has placed Arkham House back in its old niche market. Hierophants of the Elder Ones will celebrate the publication of these two volumes:

Flowers from the Moon and Other Lunacies
By Robert Bloch
Arkham House, 1998
296 pp., $22.95

This is a collection, assembled by Robert Price, the editor of *Crypt of Cthulhu*, of Bloch stories (horror and fantasy) from *Weird Tales* and competitors, none of them previously collected. Of course it isn't the author's best. He assembled that himself. But the contents range from impressive historical horror ("The Dark Isle," about druids) to the sort of fantasy comedy Bloch made uniquely his own ("The Sorcerer Runs for Sheriff"); none of them, in context, do the author discredit. They fill out the corpus of his work. They entertain.

Rating: ☆☆☆☆

Lovecraft Remembered
Edited by Peter Cannon
Arkham House, 1998
486 pp., $29.95

If you can get past the ghastly dust jacket (and you will), you'll find this is a charming and substantial compilation of memoirs and evaluations of H.P. Lovecraft written by people who knew him, the earliest from an amateur journal published in 1920, the last an interview with HPL's old friend Harry Brobst conducted in 1990. That's seventy years of first-hand Lovecraftiana, about all we're going to get (obviously), and it goes a long way toward explaining the remarkable impact Lovecraft and Lovecraft's writings had on so many people, and why he is still read after all this time. Contributors are grouped as Neighbors, Ama-teurs, Fans, Ladies, Professionals, Critics, etc. Editor Cannon happily avoids intruding with footnotes when the writers are in error or even talking nonsense (as August Derleth is, trotting out the "All my stories," Black Magic quote again, noting a non-existent similarity between the Lovecraft Mythos and Christianity), but politely notes these things in the introductions to each section.

Read this alongside the Joshi and de Camp biographies.
Rating: ☆☆☆☆☆

First Contacts
By Murray Leinster
NESFA Press, 1998
464 pp., $25.00

Another in NESFA's superb archival series, which will keep much of Science Fiction's past alive through the present Dark Age, until the tide of Book Product recedes and such treasures may reach the general public again. Will F. Jenkins (who wrote most of his SF as Leinster) was a careful commercial writer of the pulp era, with more integrity than most, who wrote in a style that could combine the "Gee whiz!" of the pre-Golden Age *Astounding* with hints of greater possibilities. Here we have "Sidewise in Time," the pioneering alternate time-track story I discussed at some length in this column a few issues back. The whole field of science-fictional alternate histories grew out of this one. And there's "First Contact," again, archetypal, the reason we call such stories "first contact stories." As his career progressed, Leinster wrote in a more restrained manner. He continued to mature, like Edmond Hamilton or Jack Williamson, and left most of his pulp colleagues behind in the dust. I don't think he ever progressed as far as Williamson did, but he helped lay the groundwork for much of modern science fiction and was, in his own way, an important writer.
Rating: ☆☆☆☆☆

Science Fiction:
The Gernsback Years
By Everett F. Bleiler
(with the assistance of
Richard J. Bleiler)
Kent State Univ. Press, 1998
730 pp., no price listed.

I can't find any price on this massive funerary volume, even in the publicity material that came along with it. Probably about $100. It's an essential reference book for the future study of science fiction, as, particularly for researchers outside of fandom proper who don't have access to private collections, it becomes the chief source for information about the contents of the SF pulp magazines in the first decade of the genre's self-awareness, 1926-36. The authors have used no secondary sources themselves, but have actually read all those stories, many of which they candidly describe as terrible. In one sense, this book is a guide to stories no one need read again, though there are a few gems noted throughout, which anthologists should investigate.

The Gernsback Era was the amateur hour for magazine SF, in which most of the writing was sub-pulp and the ideation primitive. I note the intriguing fact that the Gernsback magazines seem to have averaged only fifteen manuscript submissions a week. Today, an editor should expect more like 200. In those days, science fiction was so scarce that certainly Gernsback was in no position to demand that his writers be able to *write*, if he cared. That he paid badly, if at all, surely did not help attract more accomplished contributors.

The result is that this book is a kind of tombstone for an entire, forgotten generation of science fiction writers. I recall something Michael Swanwick said once, about how wonderful it was around 1970 when just about everybody in science fiction was still alive, as if you could walk into a room and meet Shakespeare, Melville, Poe, Hemingway, etc. all at once. Well, that's only true if you ignore what went before. What really surprised me here was the data (much taken from Social Security records, etc.) about so many writers who must have written SF in youth, then gone on to other things, totally forgotten by the SF field as they lived out their lives into the '60s, '70s, even '90s. G. Peyton Wertenbacker wrote some pretty good stories as late as 1930. He lived till 1968. Sewell Peaslee Wright nearly invented *Star Trek* with his "Commander John Hanson" in the first couple of years of *Astounding*. He seems to have stopped writing about 1933, but he lived till 1970. Richard Tooker and Neil R. Jones (both died in 1988) tried to continue their careers, but failed to learn and adapt the way Williamson or Leinster did, and so fell by the wayside. Victor Endersby (also died 1988) who is described as "not a great writer, but one of the more intelligent contributors" to *Wonder Stories*, was ultimately lost to Theosophy. And there's the case of Frank K. Kelly (born 1914, still living), whose SF career was nipped in the bud by a teacher, who went on to write for *The New Yorker* and work for Harry Truman.

What we have here, in more detail than I can begin to describe, is the history of a whole lost world of Science Fiction. The two Bleilers are the guys in the pith helmets, who descend into this musty tomb before us and mark the way, noting some of the more interesting artifacts as they pass.
Rating: ☆☆☆☆☆ ❑

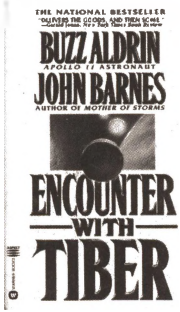
Moving?

If you plan to move in the next three months, please be sure to let us know your change of address, as the U.S Postal Service will only forward 2nd class mail for four weeks after a move.

Mysteries & Magic

Encounter with Tiber
By Buzz Aldrin
and John Barnes
Warner Aspect, 1996
640 pp., $6.59

I stayed away from *Encounter with Tiber* for close to two years because I doubted that a celebrity author could produce a good book even with John Barnes co-authoring it. I was wrong. *Encounter with Tiber* is excellent and one of the best SF books of its year.



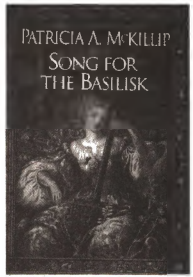
The story is in sections, some set in the near-future space program, some in the mid-21st century, and some 9000 years ago when aliens from Alpha Centauri visited Earth. The aliens were at a stage of development just a bit ahead of us today when they discovered that they were about be lead characters in *When Worlds Collide*. Orbits were such that they had one near-miss with the rogue planet, with a destructive collision scheduled for about 120 years later. They launched into a full-scale space program and managed to get an interstellar ship headed, sublight, to our Solar System, where unmanned probes had already shown that there was a life-bearing planet.

The first manned ship was exploration only — the idea was that evacuation fleets would follow fifty or so years later. Obviously they failed, but how?

Encounter with Tiber begins just a couple of years in our future, where a bit of luck revitalizes the manned space program with a move to nearly off-the-shelf technology which is much more robust and much less expensive than Shuttles. (I presume that Aldrin contributed heavily to this section — it's an engineer's dream embodied in a really serious expository lump. But it's an *interesting* expository lump.)

About the same time, a broadcast from Alpha Centauri alerts us to the facts of the prehistoric alien visits and the existence of two copies of an alien Encyclopedia, one buried at the Moon's South Pole and one buried in a crater on Mars. The race is on to find it, recover it, and read it.

The human sections — the near-future space program, the missions to the Moon to find the Encyclopedia, the later missions to Mars to find the one buried there, and the mission to Alpha Centauri — are exceptionally well done and are interspersed with long and fascinating stories of the aliens' home world, the first expedition to Earth, its failure, and the rescue of the survivors by the second expedition. (I would have liked to have read a lot more about the Mars expedition and the subsequent colonization of Mars, but I suppose that would have to have been a book of its own.)



Both the human and the alien sections are good SF. The near-future space program sections are as good as any I've ever read, and the alien sections are first rate, also. The alien world and culture are well thought out and the problems, plot, and puzzles in the book are fascinating.

Rating: ☆☆☆☆ 1/2

Rating System

☆☆☆☆☆	Outstanding
☆☆☆☆	Very Good
☆☆☆	Good
☆☆	Fair
☆	Poor

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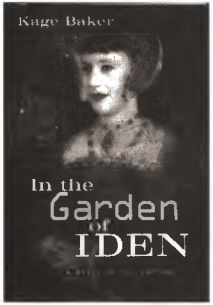
In the Garden of Iden
By Kage Baker
Harcourt Brace, 1997
329 pp., $23.00

Ultimately this book was a disappointment. It could have been either of two quite good books, but it couldn't decide which to be.

One of the books is about time travel and time travelers and has a clever premise. A company (it calls itself Dr. Zeus) is developing immortality. To test it without having to wait a thousand years, it develops time travel, sends a team back to, say, 1200 AD, administers a treatment to some "lucky" local, and then returns to the present to see how well it worked. Cute. And because the past is immutable, Dr. Zeus develops a major side-



line in preserving the past: hiding away artwork that would be lost, saving rare manuscripts before fires, and salting away plants and animals before they become extinct.

Dr. Zeus, Inc., builds up a very extensive organization spread throughout history. And it stays secret because it stayed secret. It recruits its personnel from among children who disappear without a trace — if a child is recorded as having been kidnapped by Gypsies, perhaps Dr. Zeus actually picked up the child and raised it to work immortally for the company.

The story follows a 5-year-old girl in northern Spain right after the success of the Reconquista, the reconquest of Spain from the Moslems which ended in 1492. The girl is apparently bought from her parents by people for reasons unknown, and is rescued by agents of Dr. Zeus. The Spanish Inquisition is mixed in, and in one of the book's better scenes, a priest-lawyer of the Inquisition is disgusted with a local magistrate who is convinced that there *must* be witchcraft involved somewhere — the priest-lawyer knows better and tries to steer the proceedings in a more rational direction, though like a 1950s Communist hunter, he's overzealous in seeking out the King's enemies. So far so good.

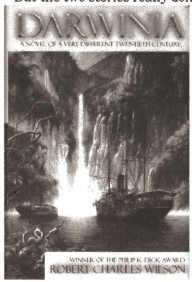
The story now takes a zag, and the girl is flown off to Dr. Zeus's secret training base in Australia, where she is turned into a cyborg (evidently the way immortality is conferred, though if that's the case, why they needed the elaborate time travel business, I don't know). She's educated and graduates at about 20 as a sophisticated young botanist. Being Spanish, she's sent to England in the train of Phillip II when he goes to wed Mary I (Bloody Mary). Her task is to visit a garden in southern England and rescue a particular species of holly which is about to go extinct.

OK. One might reasonably ask why, given that they have time travel and given that they have had it for a great long time, they waited until the very last plant of this particular holly is living in England? Why didn't they go fetch a specimen from a previous period when it was more abundant? Oh. The plot made them do it.

One might also reasonably ask why they sent a Spanish agent into England disguised as a member of the Spanish Court. Spaniards — all foreigners — were hated, and it would seem more appropriate to have used an English agent, since there were plenty of them. The plot again?

The events at Walter Iden's garden (the pun seems unnecessary) are pretty well done, and this is the other book: the young agent falling in love with Iden's Protestant secretary. The events surrounding their love affair were interesting and could have made a good story by themselves. (I would have liked more on how the young, educated Protestant was interacting with the more traditional elements of local society, too.)

But the two stories really don't



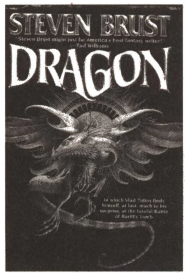
fit too well together.

Some other peeves:

If the girl was extracted from her milieu at age 5 and educated in a very sophisticated, post-20th century establishment for 15 years, I don't believe that she'd retain very much of her native culture. Yet a lot of her motivation supposedly stems from superstitions and the like absorbed early. Too much to be believable, I think. (The plot again?)

I *really* hated the Radio Zeus

broadcasts: Supposedly, Dr. Zeus maintains agents all over Europe who do nothing but broadcast play-by-plays of local history as it unfolds using very specific mid-'90s news show inter-correspondent chatter. For example, while watching the execution of a Protestant bishop by Mary, "And now the news. And it's grim, we regret to say: Today England's first victim of the Counter-Reformation was burnt at Smithfield. — Your news team had an operative on the scene, and Diotima, can you tell us about it?" "Well, Reg, you know



I've been in the field a long time, and I've been there for most of the big events —" *Oh come now!* Even if Dr. Zeus had so much manpower that it could do this correspondent thing (in which case why import Spaniards to go after English holly?), they certainly wouldn't speak that way. Bathos, pure and simple. (And I can't even blame this on Baker's need to move the plot along — this was self-indulgence.)

And the underground railroads (literally) and hidden landing pads that Dr. Zeus has all over Europe are ridiculous.

In the end, someone who is plainly a pretty good writer took too many ideas and crammed them into too small a book — and asked me to sentence my disbelief to hang until quite dead.

Not a winner, I'm afraid. (But it could have been.)

Rating: ☆☆☆

Song for the Basilisk
By Patricia A. McKillip
Ace Fantasy, 1998
314 pp., $22.95

Song for the Basilisk has strong echoes of McKillip's superb *Riddlemaster of Hed* trilogy, but I don't think it achieves the same level.

The main character, the hidden heir to the defeated house in a civil war, is whisked away as a child to be raised as a bard at a school for bards on a far distant island. He is interested in little but his music (though bards appear to be more poets than musicians) and lives the life of a teacher at the school for bards. He does take time to marry and have a son.

Eventually, he wanders almost aimlessly back to the city where he was born and enters a school for music, from which he is hired to catalog the musical manuscripts looted by the Basilisk — the affectionate nickname given the winner in that old civil war.

Things happen and he stumbles into a considerable personal magic, ignites a new civil war, and almost absent-mindedly defeats the Basilisk.

McKillip is best when she is portraying magic: her magic never comes from elaborate formulae or follows arcane, over-detailed rules. It comes from within the character and, while often quite well controlled, is *never* deeply analyzed and may well be unanalyzable. She shows this very, very well.

In *Song for the Basilisk*, however, this isn't enough by itself to match her greatest past books.

This is a good, enjoyable fantasy, but not one which will be remembered as one of McKillip's best.

Rating: ☆☆☆ 1/2

Darwinia
By Robert Charles Wilson
Tor, 1996
320 pp., $22.95

Here's a strange one that just barely misses being a truly great piece of SF.

The time is about 1910, and after a night in which there are strange lights in the skies, it is discovered that Europe is gone, replaced by a continent (named

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Darwinia) which is physically fairly similar, but covered with life which might have resulted from a parallel evolution in which insect-derived life dominated. People explore the strange, new world, and a big chunk of the story follows the Finch Expedition up into the Alps about ten years later.

The expedition is nearly wiped out by hostile humans (people from various European colonial empires have returned to lay claim to what had been their homelands), but discovers a mysterious cyclopean ruin high in the Alps before the survivors stagger back toward civilization.

Then things get strange!

Wilson does a fine job of making this all fit together and manages to turn something that began like a piece of ersatz early 20th century lost-world fiction into fine SF. The characters are interesting, and he explains enough, but not too much.

So what was missing? I can't put my finger on it, but I think that he relied on a few too many "just because" reasons — the picket's limitations and need to communicate with the main character: why? Just because. The similar limitations of the forces of Evil and their possession of other humans. Etc. (Though how he could have plugged these minor gaps and made it all appear to be natural outgrowths of the story is beyond me.)

Still, this is a first-rate piece of work.

Rating: ☆☆☆☆

Dragon
By Steven Brust
Tor, 1998
288 pp., $22.95

The Vlad Taltos saga continues, though this book fills in an earlier episode in Vlad's life rather than continue the fairly bleak narrative the later books have gotten to.

Dragon covers Vlad's early involvement with Morrolan, Aleria, and others in the Battle of Barrit's Tomb, which had previously only been alluded to in passing. It explains Vlad's close connection to Morrolan — one of the greatest Dragon sorcerers.

The story deals with why Dragons (the caste of Dragaeran military leaders) are as they are (Dragaerans are stereotypical of their Houses in the potboiler fantasy tradition; Brust takes a pretty good shot at making it reasonable), and what it's like to be a foot soldier in one of their armies. (Vlad enlists as a way to sneak up on a target.) The sections with Vlad-the-foot-soldier were probably the best and held my attention far better than the magic-and-floating-castles parts.

The series continues to be quite enjoyable, and Brust continues to invent a fascinating society — and Vlad is getting ever more Zelaznian in his wisecracking. It does, however, seem to lack the zing of a new series.

Rating: ☆☆☆ ½

The Avram Davidson Treasury
Edited by Robert Silverberg and Grania Davis
Tor, 1998
447 pp., $27.95

Avram Davidson's unique voice can be heard through this wonderful, thick volume of the best of his shorter fiction. It includes my personal favorites "The Golem," "Or All the Seas with Oysters," and "Revenge of the Cat-Lady" and thirty-five other stories, each introduced by a different person. It's a pity that space did not also permit the inclusion of more than one of his Dr. Eszterhazy stories, or any of his "Adventures in Unhistory" — essays of marvelous erudition, but how can one book contain Avram Davidson?

Rating: ☆☆☆☆ ❑

Have Any Thoughts?

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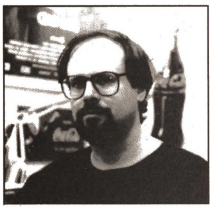
Space Heroes

It was a small window of opportunity, for NASA and for me. If the Discovery launch was postponed, even for a day, even for more than a couple of hours, we would have to leave and I would not get to see it, simple as that. My husband warned me of the odds ahead of time, having been to two scrubbed launches himself. I looked at him and smiled.

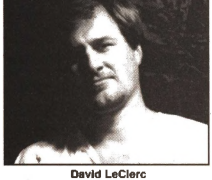


Dan Persons

"It's going to go, I can just feel it. It's **John Glenn**. The man is charmed."

I was right. It was a picture-perfect launch. And an added bonus for me was meeting **Wally Schirra** and **Eugene Cernan**, of the Mercury, Gemini, and Apollo programs. I watched Schirra and Cernan sail through hours of television and radio interviews, sitting in the hot Florida sun as cool as can be, swapping hilarious stories, trading good-natured barbs, exuding male bonhomie, larger than life. Inducing even in jaded television crew people's faces that flushed, broad smile of awe.

"Why are you here?" asked the tall woman from BBC radio, who was picking

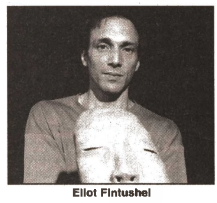


David LeClerc

Americans out of the crowd at random. I thought of Glenn, Schirra, Cernan. "Because," I replied, "we need our heroes."

*****

In this issue, our former "Through the Lens" columnist, **Dan Persons**, is back with a story about artificial intelligence. "Day the First, Day the Last" has a protagonist with more than just intelli-



Eliot Fintushel

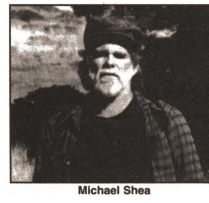
gence: it's got Personality.

Dan is the editor of the new *AnimeFantastique Magazine*. The premiere issue came out in December 1998, and Persons says it "looks great." The quarterly magazine is about anything to do with quality animation, Western and Asian. It is published by the *Cinefantastique* and *Femme Fatales* group, and Persons says it "falls somewhere in the middle of *Starlog* and *Cahiers du Cinema*. It is the first animation magazine to treat animation as a serious art form," with a mixture of "big, beautiful color and serious intent."

When I spoke to him, Persons was looking forward to the premiere of the film *Prince of Egypt* and getting back to the novel and stories he put on hold this past year while he got the magazine going.

"Day the First, Day the Last" is illustrated by **David LeClerc**, who has been sculpting props for some fantasy pieces he is working on. He is a Society for Creative Anachronism buff and has been "trying to build up my plate armor so I can fight. You're never too old to have fun." He has also discovered that his teenaged daughter, **Shannon**, is becoming a science fiction fan. (So it *does* run in families.)

In "De Rerum" by **Eliot Fintushel**, it's a topsy-turvy world when business interests start messing with prehistory. Fintushel "lives in solitary dignity in a working-class neighborhood north of San Francisco." Besides writing novels (for his God) and short stories (for "you!") Fintushel is an itinerant performer of mask theater and mime. He has twice won the National Endowment for the Arts Solo Performer Award. His work is regularly seen in *Asimov's*, *Crank!*, and



Michael Shea

other magazines of speculative fiction. His novella "Izzy and the Father of Terror" was one of the stories on the preliminary ballot for a Nebula.

"De Rerum" is illustrated by **Clyde Duensing III**. Duensing is doing a lot more computer animation for a game company he works with. When I spoke to him, he had just moved to another house only a mile away and was still unpacking.

In "Water of Life" by **Michael Shea**, life is like vintage wine, literally. Shea was born in Los Angeles, grew to "multilingual middle age" in Culver City, Berkeley, Juneau, Prince George,

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Jael

Jon Foster

Minneapolis, New York, Paris, Bayonne, Seville, and San Francisco. He currently "senesces in the 'wine country.'" When I spoke to him he had just completed his third Nifft the Lean novel, *The A'Rak*, as well as the novel *Mr. Cannyharme*.

"Water of Life" is illustrated by **Joel**. She says her "cute cop husband **Dusty** posed for it," although since she was trying to depict a broken-down wino, Dusty definitely looks "a lot cuter in person."

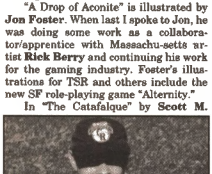
Recently her husband treated her to a surprise birthday trip to Cancun. She didn't know where she was going until she boarded the plane, and it turned out they had the plane largely to themselves, since they were heading into the path of Hurricane Mitch and most everyone else was trying to get out. They were lucky; they saw some cool circular cloud patterns from the plane, but the storm never got to where they were staying.

"A Drop of Aconite" by **J. Brooke** is about getting revenge after you've died. Better late than never. (Aconite is a poison from the leaves and roots of the pretty little monkshood plant.)

J. Brooke is the mysterious author of "The E-Ticket" (*Aboriginal SF* no. 59-60) and "E.R." (*Aboriginal SF* no. 39-40). I say mysterious because he/she does not reveal any life details to nosy columnists. Well, whoever you are, keep those stories coming!

"A Drop of Aconite" is illustrated by **Jon Foster**. When last I spoke to Jon, he was doing some work as a collaborator/apprentice with Massachu-setts artist **Rick Berry** and continuing his work for the gaming industry. Foster's illustrations for TSR and others include the new *SF* role-playing game "Alternity."

In "The Catafalque" by **Scott M.**



Scott M. Azmus

Carol Heyer

Azmus, a boy and his cruel, abusive father battle it out as the fate of an alien race hangs in the balance.

Azmus is a former lieutenant commander in the U.S. Navy. One day he "bought a Macintosh and decided to get serious," and was further inspired by Dean Whitlock's story "Sliding the Edge" in *Aboriginal SF* (no. 31-32). "Catafalque" was his first professional sale, but since then he has had short stories published in *Galaxy* and *Space and Time* and has written "Reflections in Period Glass" in *Writers of the Future (Vol. 12)* and "Red Moon," also a *Writers of the Future* winner.

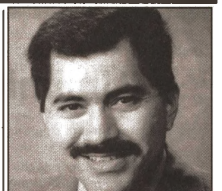
Azmus is married to **Dora Azmus**, a naval officer, and they have three kids, one dog, and four ferrets.

"The Catafalque" is illustrated by **Carol Heyer**. Heyer tells me she postponed a lot of projects to take care of an elderly aunt who recently passed away. But now it sounds like she's back to being the busiest artist on the planet. She is very excited about the 12 plates she just completed for J.W. Powell's historical Grand Canyon adventure *Into the Great Unknown*. She is starting another book for the same publisher, Ithaca Publishing, about the first guy to climb the Matterhorn. And she's working on the art that will go on the Internet. (I notice Internet tie-ins are the hot thing in publishing right now.)

Among other things, she has recently done a cover for TSR and a *Star Trek: the Next Generation* encyclopedia, Hobbit collector cards, and *Dune* collector cards. She was working on an *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* cover when I spoke to her, and planning to spend the weekend in a show with three other children's book artists at a gallery near Newport Beach.

"Crime and Punishment on the Takeaway" by **A. John Wallace** is a story that reads like a ghastly urban legend of the Los Angeles freeways.

The author, and presumably the setting, however, are Australian. Wallace is the author of "Cold Storage" in *Aboriginal SF* No. 51-52. Six years ago he sold his first story to *Aurealis* magazine while working as an orderly at a local hospital. He has since written two novels and several short stories. His pet



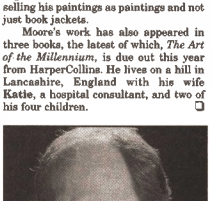
Alan Gutierrez

peeves include "bad writing, bad driving and all salesmen." His pet loves are "good music, fantasy epics and stupid action movies."

"Crime and Punishment on the Takeaway" is illustrated by **Alan Gutierrez**. When I spoke to him, he had just finished some interiors for *Marion Zimmer Bradley's Fantasy Magazine*, as well as a commissioned piece and some "Sovereign Stone" role-playing game work. He was looking forward to the publication in March of a painting he did this past summer for TSR's "Dream Spheres," and having quite a bit of success at recent conventions.

Our cover art is by British artist **Chris Moore**. Moore studied illustration at the Royal College of Art in the early 1970s and joined the Artists Partners Agency in the 1980s, where he continued his work in mass market paperbacks and hardcovers. His first trip to America in 1984 generated work for Dell and Random House. Then in 1995 he attended the World Science Fiction Convention in Glasgow where he showed some original artwork for the first time, sold several pieces, and met people interested in selling his work. It was then he began to realize there was a market for selling his paintings as paintings and not just book jackets.

Moore's work has also appeared in three books, the latest of which, *The Art of the Millennium*, is due out this year from HarperCollins. He lives on a hill in Lancashire, England with his wife **Katie**, a hospital consultant, and two of his four children. ❑



Chris Moore

Unlimited Energy

I'm as eco-conscious as the next guy, perhaps even more so. I recycle, and pat myself on the back when I think that for each aluminum can tossed into my green eco-bin I've saved a half-gallon of oil which will not have to be burned in the refining and manufacturing process of that can's replacement. Hell, I'm even a card-carrying member of the Sierra Club.

But at times I get a bit tired of all the pissing and moaning that goes on about the problems that this old Earth faces. I'm sure you know what I'm talking about. We're running out of stuff. In particular, we're running out of energy. Oil will be gone in fifty years, natural gas in a century or so, and then we'll have nothing left to burn except for the massive reserves of methane hydrates (methane molecules locked in ice crystals) that are hiding just beneath the ocean's floor. The methane hydrate reserves would carry us for centuries, but the eco-elite wring their hands at the prospects of the massive eco-tampering involved in mining the ocean floors to get at these vast fuel reserves.

And let's not even talk about nuclear energy based on splitting atoms.

It's *so-so* dangerous. Reactors can melt down and poison vast tracts of the world's landscapes for millennia. That certainly is no answer.

So what is one to do? Should this planet's future energy needs be supplied by solar, fusion, hydrothermal, biomass burning, wind, or some other source that has not even been dreamed up yet? Which one is the best bet?

Which one has the *potential* to deliver the goods?

And that is the real question. How much potential does any one of those alternative sources really possess? Can you answer that question? Probably not. But don't feel bad. Until I started thinking about this column, neither could I. You see, the problem is that before you can evaluate whether a proposed solution really has the potential to solve a problem, you have to understand the magnitude of the problem.

If you take the standpoint that the Earth is running out of energy, that we don't have the resources to keep burning fuels at our current consumption rates, you have absolutely no chance in Hell of solving the problem, of coming up with a solution, unless you know just how much energy we are currently consuming. How can you possibly hope to find a solution when you haven't even defined the problem?

So let us do a little defining in regard to this *supposed* energy problem that old Mother Earth is facing. The humans of this world manage to produce 355 quadrillion BTUs of energy a year (quadrillion is a 1 followed by 15 zeros — but rather than using the space-sucking form of 1,000,000,000,000,000, we will put on our science hats and use the expression $1x10^{15}$). This comes about primarily through the burning of organics — whether those organics are oil or wood-based, it is all the same thing — rip out a carbon atom and add on a couple of oxygen atoms to come up with CO^2.

So are there any potential energy sources out there which could supply $355x10^{15}$ BTUs of energy? I doubt that you can really venture a guess. And when I first came across this number, neither could I. The problem was that I didn't have a good feel for just what a BTU was. Was this a big chunk of energy, something that could flatten entire cities in a nuclear-blast-like fashion, or merely the amount of energy given off by a burning candle? What are we dealing with here?

Definition time.

Yes, a BTU is, in fact, a British Thermal Unit. Hardly insightful, is it? And it doesn't help to know that 1 BTU is equivalent to 1055 joules, with a joule being the energy unit that scientists typically use. What will help us out here is to know that 1 BTU is equivalent to $2.93x10^{-4}$ kW-hrs.

Take a 100-watt light bulb. Actually, let's take 10 of them. Turn them on, and what sort of energy are you burning? Well, these ten bulbs are putting out 1000 watts in total, or, in the more conventional notation, 1 kW (where the k stands for kilo and means 1000, while W stands for watts). Let those bulbs burn for an hour, and the energy that's been consumed is 1 kW-hr. Now from the above definition we know that 1 BTU is equivalent to $2.9x10^{-4}$ kW-hrs. Do a little division here, and you

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will find out that you burn 1 BTU of energy with those ten light bulbs once they've been on for just a hair over 1 second. That's it. Ten light bulbs burning for 1 second consume 1 BTU. That gives you a bit of a yardstick.

One BTU is not all that much energy. But when you slap 15 zeros to the right of the decimal place, that is a different story. This gets you up there to the energy levels needed to run this planet. To help us all out in this little discussion, I propose to make up a new unit to describe the energy which the humans of this world manage to generate each year. I will call it the Annual Energy Unit — the *AEU*. I will define 1 AEU as equivalent to 355×10^{15} BTUs. There you go — simple. The folks of this planet generate 1 AEU a year. You can think of 1 AEU as equivalent to the burning of $3{,}550 \times 10^{15}$ light bulbs for 1 second if that gives you a useful image. Be damn sure to turn off the lights when you leave *that* room — the electricity bill is going to be a real killer.

Now, what are the potential sources of energy that this planet has hiding about, stuff that we can tap into in order to improve standards of living, raise the Third World to First World status, and keep up with the electric bills generated by the cancerous-like growth of Las Vegas and all its pulsing lights? We could talk about the obvious stuff. I could bore you to tears showing that if we take full advantage of every last windy location on Earth, even including the hot air that blows continually out of Washington, we might capture 0.12 AEUs, while the burning of every scrap of trash in new high-tech eco-joyful incinerators might generate another 0.03 AEUs.

Boring.

What we need to do is to think a bit more creatively, to come up with something really big, something that can not only get us into the 1 AEU ballpark but even exceed it. Are there any such potential sources out there? There just may be. I've been thinking about three different approaches.

People Power

Take a look at the affluent folks on this planet. What is the biggest problem they've got? The answer is obvious. They're fat. They eat too much. And when they discover they can't fit into their jeans, they pile into their Range Rovers (or whatever Urban Assault Vehicles they are currently leasing) and head for the gym to burn off a few of those excess calories.

What a waste.

Rather than pressing those weights or thudding along on that treadmill, all that energy, which is being dissipated in the form of waste heat and body odor, should be dumped right back into the local electrical grid. Just slap a generator on the treadmill. Instead of lifting weights, hoist up a few buckets of water and empty them down a little spillway that leads to a turbine that can generate a few watts.

People power.

So just how much potential is there in terms of people power? Let's figure a future of some 50 years down the road in which we've got 10 billion overweight types on this planet. Let's work them out three times a week for 1 hour each session. Just how much work can you do in an hour? I figure *you* could lift a 10 kilogram bucket of water from the floor, to about chest high, some 20 times a minute. In a one hour workout you would have lifted 1200 buckets of water. So how much potential energy is in all those buckets of water (and for those of you who don't think that 10 kg of water raised chest high has any potential energy, then just drop that water filled bucket on your foot and see how loud you scream when a few toes get broken)? Raise up any weight, and its potential energy can be expressed as:

$$\text{Potential Energy} = m \times g \times h$$

where m is its mass, g is earth's gravitational constant, and h is the height to which you've raised the weight. Plug in the numbers (m is 10 kg, h is about 1 meter, and g is 9.8 m/sec^2) and you find that each bucketful you hoist represents 98 joules. You should do this 1200 times in your workout, 3 times a week, for 52 weeks each year. This means you've generated some $98 \times 1200 \times 3 \times 52$ joules of energy, which comes to a total of 1.83×10^7 joules. Now, when you figure that there are 10 billion people doing this (10^{10} people), this means that you've got a grand total of 1.83×10^{17} joules of energy socked right away in the old potential energy bank.

Wow!

But before we start celebrating, we need to know what this is in terms of AEUs. I'll do the conversion for you. It so happens that 1 AEU is equivalent to 3.74×10^{20} joules. So what did all that exercise get us? The grand total comes to .00049 AEUs. That doesn't sound very impressive, does it?

Perhaps we need to do more exercise. Maybe what we need in this SF future powered by the sweat of our brows is a few more people hoisting up those buckets of water. Let's give this little scenario a dystopic twist. Let's put 10 billion more folks on the planet, whose only purpose in life is to lift buckets of water (we'll breed them, actually bioengineer them for this task). Rather than exercising 3 hours a week, let's

work them out for 100 hours a week. So how much energy does that give us? It comes to a grand total of 0.033 AEUs. Well, we're getting close now. If you want to run this entire planet based solely on sweat and muscles and generate 1 AEU, then you'd need 306 billion slaves (I mean highly motivated energy technicians) lifting those buckets of water every waking moment of their existences.

And of course you've got to feed these technicians, have a place for them to sleep, and if you're really nice, you might even dress them. Taking these little side issues into account, it just may not be possible to run this planet solely on sweat-power.

What to do?

Is there a better approach, something that may still involve the lifting of water, but not actually require those 306 billion bucket technicians? I think so.

Tidal Power

Rather than rely on people power, let's apply a little planetary power. You see, each and every day, a great deal of water is being hoisted thanks to a very peculiar aspect of planetary mechanics. The moon tugs at the Earth, and as a result of that gravitational attraction, entire oceanfuls of water are raised up.

You know. We call it tides.

Well, that is interesting. In the above example, we learned that potential energy can be thought of in terms of the product of the mass of some water, how high it is lifted, and the gravitational field under which all this lifting is taking place. In the case of the tides pulling up the ocean's waters, we can approximate that tides lift the oceans up about 1 meter, the same as those bucketfuls of water hoisted by our human energy technicians. But unlike our technicians, who managed the task some 1200 times an hour, the tides only rise and fall two times a day. That does not sound very promising, does it? The tides lift up the oceans only 1 meter, twice a day.

But don't forget the last item in our little equation — the term m — the mass of what is being lifted. In the case of our energy technicians, we had them lifting 10 kg. In the case of the moon, lifting up our oceans, all that water weighs a bit more, actually quite a bit more. The entire mass of the Earth's oceans come in at about 1.5×10^{21} kg. Now that is a lot of water. So if the moon is gracious enough to lift up this mass of water twice a day to a height of 1 meter, then just how much potential energy does it represent? Do the math — $1.5 \times 10^{21} \times 9.8 \times 1$. This comes out to 1.47×10^{22} joules, which is equivalent to 39 AEUs. And all this energy is generated in a single day. Remember that it took 306 billion energy technicians hoisting water for an entire year to generate just 1 AEU. The moon tugging on our oceans is capable of generating more than 14,000 times the energy of all our energy technicians. And the moon doesn't have to be fed or clothed, and it doesn't require a place to sleep.

Now we're talking — forget those 306 billion energy technicians and sign up the moon. But you know, this moon-ocean solution does have one significant drawback: that is an awful lot of water to be dealing with — literally oceans full of it. It would be nice to get back down to the bucket-sized volume of water, something much easier to handle, but figure out something to do with it to get out a lot more energy than can be obtained by simply hoisting it up and then dumping it down a spillway. Is there some other form of potential energy hiding in that bucket of water?

It so happens there is.

Einstein Power

You might want to think of this as the ultimate potential energy. *Mass and energy are the same thing.* Everyone knows that. Einstein told us that, and I would think that except for Michael Jordan and Ronald McDonald, Einstein is the most recognizable face in the human race, and his equation, $E = mc^2$, is certainly the most recognizable equation.

So let us suppose that in the not too distant future we figure out how to convert mass directly into energy (I don't know exactly how that will be done — I leave it as an exercise for the reader). Let's get one of our energy technicians from our first example, and instead of tossing the water from his/her bucket down the water chute, we have them toss into our mass/energy converter. Our technician could handle 1200 buckets an hour, for a total of nearly 20,000 buckets in a 16-

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hour day. At 10 kg per bucket, that means our single technician can supply 200,000 kg of water a day. So if we use Einstein's handy equation, remembering that c, the speed of light, is $3x10^8$ meters/second, then we end up with a total energy of $1.8x10^{22}$ joules, which is equivalent to 48 AEUs.

There we go.

One technician, working one very long, very hard day, can produce 48 times the energy this entire planet currently generates in an entire year. This is about the same amount as produced by our moon-ocean approach, but doesn't actually require us handling all that water and getting it to run down some planet-spanning sluice gate to drive a continent-sized turbine. I say this is the way to go. And think of the potential corporate profits if we implement this solution. We had 306 billion technicians working every waking moment for an entire year, and now we can generate 48 times the energy with a single technician working for a single day (the ultimate in part-time labor — we won't even have to give this technician any benefits). The stockholders will love this.

So there you go. This planet has got energy to burn. We will not be running out of energy anytime soon. That is the good news. But with the good news there is always some bad as well. Now that we've got this wonderful energy-full future, what could we possible have to worry about? What could ruin our golden future?

Well, the answer should be obvious.

We will be sitting here on our energy-rich Garden of Eden when from out of the blue some big ugly rock will come screaming out of the void, smacking us so hard that enough soot, debris, and leftover remnants of Bruce Willis will be thrown into the atmosphere to cut off our sunlight, and this planet will soon be as dead as the moon. It is only a matter of time. Now, we were able to solve the energy crisis without too much muss and fuss (unless of course you are one of the energy technicians hoisting all that water — I imagine they might consider that solution filled with a bit of muss and fuss). So how should we get rid of these marauding rocks?

Big Rocks

I've seen the movies just like the rest of you. You know the solution. Mix a bunch of nuclear weapons with some wild and wacky astronauts, launch out to the rock, and blow the damn thing up just a second or two before it smacks into the Earth.

Well, I for one say no thanks.

There is way too much tension and sweating involved in this solution. You don't know until the last possible moment if tomorrow is going to be bright and sunny in this new energy abundant ecotopia we've built for ourselves, or if we're about to go the way of the dinosaurs.

I want something with a bit more certainty.

Let's think about the problem in a slightly different light. We've got this great big rock heading our way. But you see, that is not exactly right. It is not heading our way at all. It just so happens that the rock's path and our path will cross at the same moment at some distant location. What a drag.

Think of it this way. Assume you take off in an westerly direction from New York City in the family van, while a buddy of yours takes off in an easterly direction from Los Angeles in his Volkswagen Bug. You know your buddy is heading in your general direction and wonder if there is any chance that you might see him along the way of your trip.

You plot out your trajectory and then you plot out his trajectory.

Disaster.

You determine that at exactly 30 hours, 12 minutes, and 2.93 seconds into your trip, your van and his Bug will intersect 22 yards west of the city limits of Shreveport, Louisiana, right on the on/off ramp, while your buddy is exiting in quest of a double Whopper and you are getting back on Interstate 20 with a Butterfinger Breeze wedged tightly between your legs.

Drag.

What to do?

Well, conventional wisdom says that you employ a crack team of nuclear-laden commandos to head out before you and nuke your buddy just before he hits the off ramp. But is there another way? Is there a less radical approach?

Actually, there is.

Just as you pass through Atlanta, chugging along I-285,

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you could tap the brake, dropping your speed from 75 to 74 mph for 3 seconds before resuming your normal 75 mph. That's all it will take. Courtesy of that nearly insignificant midcourse correction in your trajectory, you'll miss his Bug by a good 4 feet as you go screaming through that Shreveport exit.

No nuclear weapons required.

So what does that tell us about this problem that we have with the rock that's coming to smack us? You don't need to vaporize the rock. All you need to do is make sure that planet Earth and the rock do not meet. There are two ways of doing this. You can change the speed or path of the rock, or change the speed or path of old Mother Earth.

The answer should be obvious.

Forget about moving the rock. Once again let me remind you of the movies that we've seen. If you send those astronauts out there millions of miles into space to move the rock, something always happens to mess up the operation. The rock breaks in half and now you've got two rocks about to hit the planet. Or your astronaut hero fires a retro rocket when he thought he was opening the fridge for a beer, and Earth's entire future gets tossed into the deep freeze because our hero needed a cold one.

No. I say that we should go for the more realistic solution, the one with a much higher prospect for success. *We just change the trajectory of the Earth.* So what have we got to do? For argument's sake we will assume that we spot this rock some three years before it is going to smack us. That is pretty realistic. Don't get me started on why Bruce Willis and his friends could not spot a rock the size of Texas until it was only weeks away from hitting Earth. I guess every pair of binoculars just happened to be broken at that time, and all the astronomers had been on long vacations.

But I digress.

Assume that we have a three-year warning.

The Earth has a diameter of about 8000 miles, which means that if the rock is on a dead center trajectory with the planet, then Earth had better be 4000 miles to the side when that rock passes by in order to miss us. The Earth moves at a speed of 64,498 mph as it whizzes around the sun, and weighs in at 5.97×10^{24} kg. In order to miss that rock we need to slow down the Earth so that it comes up 4000 miles short after having traveled for 3 years (this is 26,280 hours). This can be accomplished by decreasing Earth's speed by a mere 0.152 mph (or, using the standard scientific units of meters/second, 0.068 m/s). That is not much when you are already clocking 64,498 mph.

And just how do we slow down the planet? We can't exactly stomp on the brakes, can we? Well, perhaps we can. You see there is this little law discovered by Sir Isaac Newton that says that for every action there is an opposite and equal reaction. He also said that the momentum of any system cannot be changed unless some external force acts on it (where momentum is an object's mass multiplied by its speed).

Very handy.

What this means is that if you toss something off the Earth, into the direction the planet is traveling, the Earth must slow down just a bit, with its momentum decreased by just the momentum of what we tossed off the planet.

Good.

Now, from our early work, it is obvious that energy is no longer a problem on Earth. We have that technician working one day a year, feeding our mass to energy converter, supplying us more than we need. I say that we put the lazy bum to work and give him a full-time job on this incoming rock problem.

I say we build one really big particle accelerator, one that can push a proton up to 99.99% the speed of light (a proton is nothing more than a hydrogen atom without its electron — we've got plenty of hydrogen on this planet, since we've got plenty of water — H_2O), where relativistic effects have increased its mass by roughly a factor of ten. You just aim this accelerator in the direction in which the Earth is traveling in its orbit and let the thing fire. What we need to do in order to miss the rock is to change the planet's momentum by a value of

$$\begin{aligned}\text{Change in momentum} &= 0.068 \text{ m/s} \times 5.97 \times 10^{24} \text{ kg} \\ &= 4.1 \times 10^{23} \text{ m-kg/s}\end{aligned}$$

So just how many kilograms of protons do we need to do this job? The thing to remember is that these relativistic particles are moving at the speed of light, c, which runs at 3×10^8 m/s and weigh in (m_p) at 1.67x10-26 kg. So this means that the number of relativistic protons you need to toss off planet Earth is:

$$\begin{aligned}\text{Number of protons} &= \text{Change in momentum/c} \times m_p \\ &= 8.1 \times 10^{40}\end{aligned}$$

That is a fair number of protons. But remember that you don't have to blast them all off at once. You've got three years to do it. No, you can't have your accelerator shooting protons off 24 hours a day, since the Earth is rotating. You can only reasonably use half the day (for half the day you can aim the accelerator

into the direction which the Earth is moving). This means that you've got 1.5 years of shooting time, which comes to some 4.73×10^7 seconds. So all you really need to do is make sure that your accelerator is firing at a rate of $8.5 \times 10^{40} / 4.73 \times 10^7$ seconds, which comes to a rate of 1.8×10^{33} protons per second.

No problem.

When you've got a bucket of protons sitting in the lab, nicely resting there, each particle weighs in at 1.67×10^{-27} kg. This means that each second you need to launch 3 million pounds of protons.

Perhaps that is a bit of a challenge, so make it easy on yourself. Employ a few more technicians and have 1000 of these accelerators built (they're not all that large — just a few miles long). This means that each accelerator needs to launch only 3,000 pounds of protons a second to a velocity just a hair below the speed of light.

Of course such a thing would be impossible to implement today, but in our future world in which we've licked the mass into energy problem, I suspect that this should prove to be no big deal.

Problem solved. So there you go. We've got more energy than we possibly know what to do with, and a proton accelerator system that can be used to nudge the planet about in case one of those nasty asteroids comes wandering by. The future looks mighty good from here - full of potential. Oh, and for those few sourfaces who suggest that we could use one of those proton accelerators for a second or two in order to blast that incoming asteroid into itsy-bitsy pieces, I say forget it. This blowing up business just isn't safe. Announce that you're planning to blow the rock up, and the first thing you know is Bruce Willis will show up, wanting to press the button.

And you just know nothing good is going to come from that. Despite all the wonderful potential solutions I've detailed here, you still have to accept the fact that there will always be a few things in this universe which just don't have any upside potential. ❑

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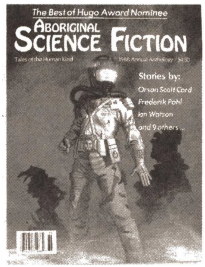

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A Drop of Aconite

By J. Brooke

Art by Jon Foster

Rand woke from the dead dazzled by sunshine, sizzling with music and laughter, amazed, confounded.

He woke from blue dreams and black midnights. He woke dipped in moonlight, ravished by noon, drunk on the summer's-day taste of the very air.

"How long have I been dead?" he whispered.

"Twenty minutes," said the attendant who held his right arm.

"And nine seconds," finished the one who held his left.

He stood.

"Ahhhh." He breathed a long wordless breath: a sound whirled out on eddies of memory, tides of dreams, nameless shivers of the long-ago.

Careful. Don't get too used to it. You're only a boarder, mouthed a ghost inside his head.

Then he remembered where he was.

He even remembered *why*.

And the most astonishing part of it was:

Anger.

"My name is Rand," he said to himself, flexing his fingers. The attendant who held his right arm let go. The man stood away, watching him closely.

"My name is Richardson Ryan Rand. I am alive. I can breathe. I can hear ... I can see!"

He could remember who he was.

He could even feel hate.

Two hours ago, he had lain on cold pavement with half his head sprayed across the oil-rainbowed asphalt.

Two hours ago he had been a flitch of flayed meat.

The paramedics had come too late.

R. Rand had been a memory, a thing of gossamer and confetti, a tatter of cloth, a sliver of bone.

That was enough, though.

He'd made a recent memory recording. A good citizen, R. Rand — no felonies, no back taxes. Now it was time for the ritual, the dark oblation that had replaced courts and juries and oaths and verdicts.

The Hunt.

He'd imagined this moment, fearing the worst.

It was odd to realize — now that the worst had happened — that all his fear had evaporated.

Only a dark sublimate of anger remained.

Now, Rand had four hours' tenancy in someone else's head. Four hours of life in which to kill his own murderer.

Two hundred forty jewel-precious minutes, fourteen hundred forty seconds to be hoarded and savored, so many lemon drops on the tongue, so many firework sparkles for the eyes.

Four hours; no more. The RNA chains that contained his personality degenerated after that, leaving his host's brain tenanted by a single personality once more.

"Well," he said. "Is the Hunt on?"

"Memory seems fine," one attendant said to the other.

"Reflexes good," the other attendant answered. "No motor coordination problems. Let's see you take a step. Once around the room, please?"

Rand inhaled a deep rich breath and walked around the morgue, laughed, shouted, pirouetted, fell back against the cold hard steel wall and put his hands up to ward off the anxious helpers.

"High spirits. You know ... the Hunt."

One of the attendants took out a delicate orrery of a device. He pressed it to Rand's forehead.

He studied the readings.

"You have three hours fifty-seven minutes," the attendant said, and collapsed the device, put it away into a steel cabinet full of shiny nameless things. "Use the time well, sir."

Click.

He locked the steel cabinet with a key.

"Your donor reverts back to a single personality at that time," the other attendant said. "Good luck with your Hunt, sir."

One of the attendants handed him a weapon, turned, and left.

Rand stood in the cool steel waiting room of the morgue.

He closed his eyes.

He smelled denatured alcohol, iodine, Pine-Sol, formaldehyde.

He heard the rumble of heating pipes.

He felt the shiver of pumps through the wall.

"So," he said to himself. "So."

I'm not going to help you, mouthed the ghost inside his head. *This is MY body. You'll damned well have to commit murder without my help.*

Rand smiled and opened his eyes.

He made two fists with his pale hands. They were strong hands, young hands.

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Very different from his own.

Well ... that was no problem.

No problem at all.

R. Rand went out into the corridor and through the double doors of the hospital and into the raindark streets, and his purpose, his anger, his rage ate through all other imperatives but one.

Dragonfly taxis whizzed overhead and Rand drank deeply of the night.

He delectated in shadows; he savored the yellow sodium-vapor glare from the streetlights.

Behind him, voices.

Hunt, went the whispers.

Intake of breath: half-heard murmurs, breathless laughter echoing in midnight alleys.

Hunt, the whispers exulted.

A Hunt!

Eyes gleamed in dark alleys when he passed. Voices supplicated: he saw the gleam of metal, offerings of knife tangs and barbed steel.

Hands reached out.

Fingers touched his raincoat furtively, with the reverence of acolytes reaching for a monstrance. Rand turned the corner.

He looked back.

A crowd of people shuffled to a stop on the sidewalk.

Young women watched him, the glow of the party still lending a burnish to their eyes: old men who leaned on their canes, ravenous for a new thrill. Children glanced secretly at one another, hiding small hands that quirked nervously, eager for the cool pommel of a stiletto or the hot barrel of a .357 Magnum.

Hunt, they whispered to one another.

The whispers faded to silence.

Rand looked at them.

He felt his forehead, where the indigo tattoo identified him as a Hunter. So that everyone would know, and stay clear ...

He removed the weapon from his raincoat.

A flurry of awe ran through the crowd.

An indicator light glowed green at the weapon's butt. It was fully charged.

Rand put it back in its holster and picked up his pace.

He crossed the street against the stoplight, and limousines screeched to a halt.

Chauffeurs cursed in rich Third World dialects that faltered and died into silence in the face of the crowd following Rand.

The chauffeurs got out of their limos and watched as he walked past.

They spotted the tattoo on his forehead.

Hunt, said the gleam in the chauffeurs' eyes. A Hunt!

The crowd accreted, gaining people by the block.

Children in the crowd started to skip ahead, chanting *Kill kill kill*.

Rand was moving quickly now.

He glanced at his Rolex: three hours, forty-two minutes.

He pushed through the theatergoers waiting for taxis, and when the doorman at the top of the steps tried to stop him he didn't stop.

A Hunt, someone shouted from the back of the crowd.

The doorman stood back, watching him with hooded eyes.

Rand entered the restaurant and removed the weapon from inside his raincoat.

Bronze highlights gleamed on the barrel of the weapon, diamond-bright cross-star refractions that outshone the candles at the diners' tables.

"Trent!"

One of the diners looked up.

All the diners looked up.

Old men whose hair was so white it looked yellow, old men with eyes dimmed by cataracts and hands discolored by brown liver spots; young girls whose teeth gleamed gold in the candlelight: waiters whose silver trays reflected the pale blue balefire that throbbed in the maw of the weapon Rand held two-handed.

"Trent," he shouted. "Stand up, I'm going to kill you."

No one moved.

Rand's target was a small man. A confident man ... the jut of his chin suggested a conqueror carved in *cavo relievo* on an Assyrian obelisk. The angle of his dark eyebrow might have been taken from the dying warrior on the Parthenon frieze.

"Rand?" he said softly. And Rand walked forward between the other diners. He held the weapon with both hands.

"Did they find enough," Trent laughed, "to put you back together again? Did they really? That's rich."

Rand walked toward the small man who had killed him twenty minutes earlier.

"Stand up," said the Hunter, "you son of a bitch."

Trent shrugged.

He placed his napkin on the immaculate white silk tablecloth, next to the smoked-glass candleholder that dominated the center of the table.

Trent smiled very slightly.

Then he brought out the weapon hidden on his lap.

Rand ducked, skittered.

A long line of light bisected the restaurant's windows and blew three tables apart.

Restaurant patrons screamed and scattered.

Rand aimed his own weapon two-handed.

The rear wall of the building disappeared in a gout of flame.

The ceiling fell in and sparks roared through the room, singed his face and hair. Rand dodged flames and falling ceiling beams while he ran to the charred table that had lately seated his enemy.

The table was empty.

Melted silverware sizzled red hot on a burning Chippendale chair. A scorched napkin fluttered on the floor, roused by gusts of superheated air.

No corpse: no body.

Rand looked up.

He held a handkerchief over his mouth while acrid black smoke whirled through the restaurant.

He kicked his way through the blasted brickwork in the restaurant's rear wall, ducked into the alley just as the second floor of the restaurant collapsed.

He heard screams behind him.

He smelled burning human flesh.

Rand coughed and wiped soot from his eyes while he hefted the weapon in one hand.

People gathered at the mouth of the alley.

Their eyes were hungry, bright with expectation.

Hunt, they murmured.

A Hunt!

He ran from them, down the alley, imagining seconds tick off on his Rolex loud as cannon shots.

The lights of the city wavered and shimmered beyond the dark rooftop. Rand inserted his hand into the base of the weapon.

Its barrel sighed open like an obscene orchid.

"I can't tell you anything," the woman said.

She backed away from him.

Gravel crunched under her feet.

Fifty storys below the rooftop, the sound of traffic was still audible: sirens echoed through steel-and-glass arroyos, dopplering up and down like lunatic kazoos.

Twin mirrors, the woman's fashionable designer eyes reflected Mondrian office buildings.

Now, at that moment, Rand understood at a visceral level why the Hunt had replaced courts, appeals, juries. At that moment he realized that no one could bribe him, no one could coerce him, no point of law could blunt his purpose. What currency could tempt him? How many millions would add an instant to his four hours?

As though sensing the thoughts in Rand's mind, the woman backed against the railing at the rooftop's edge and stopped. Her eyes gleamed, reflecting the running lights of air taxis far away. Rand was close enough to see the pupils of her eyes, a black darker than the color of her dress, darker than the fireproof gravel under her high heels, darker even than the onyx shadow of the polycarbonate railing that pressed against the woman's spine.

Rand placed the barrel of the weapon against her throat.

The woman closed her eyes.

She swallowed convulsively, a movement of india ink against sepia.

Rand leaned close.

He could smell her perfume — a sweet pungent verbena scent, a cachet that rubbed like a cat against a memory that was not his. Images rose up in his mind, recollections from someone else's life that whispered through his frontal cortex like dust over a desert dune.

"Tell me," he said to the woman who was Trent's wife.

She closed her eyes.

Tears glistened along the frown lines that framed her quivering mouth. Her head shook, and her hair whipped around her neck in the hot thermals that gusted up the side of the building. A low wordless sound issued from her throat, as though a knife were cutting her open.

"Tell me," he said.

She was shaking. Her knuckles were white where her hands gripped the polycarbonate railing, and the hot wind washed the stink of her fear into his nostrils.

Stop it, mouthed a ghost of a voice inside Rand's head. *You son of a bitch, I'll fight you. This is MY body. Not yours.*

"You can't stop me," Rand answered aloud.

The woman threw her head back, sobbing. Midnight wind whisked the sound away and only siren-howl, traffic-rumble remained.

I'm not a murderer, said the voice inside Rand's head. *I agreed to become a donor. I won't be a pdrty to THIS.*

Rand ignored the voice inside his head.

"Tell me," he repeated.

He held the weapon against the woman's blouse and pressed until he could feel her spine bend against the polycarbonate railing.

Her breasts heaved under the damasked black silk of her blouse.

An iceberg-block of memory calved, catching him off-balance. For a moment Rand swayed on a punt down the Thames, drowned by the smell of green river water and overhanging lilacs by the riverbanks where hot sunlight dappled cool green moss. But he had never been to England: he had never rowed a punt down the Thames.

Rand shook from head to shoulder, as though in the throes of delirium tremens.

He lowered the weapon.

"You know where he is," he appealed to her. "Help me."

The woman hunkered down, hugging her knees like an autism victim.

"You'll kill him," she whispered.

Rand crouched beside her.

"I have three hours and ..." He looked at his watch. "... twenty-nine minutes. Then I'm dead."

The woman stared up at him.

"Then what does it matter if you kill him?"

Rand didn't answer. The weapon gleamed, a bronze sculpture in his hand.

"It's a Hunt," he said. "My right as a citizen ... I have four hours ..."

He looked out over the skyline of the city. "Four hours." He turned back to the woman, weapon balanced on his knees. Wind combed his hair, a cold wind that tasted suddenly of stomach acid and bile.

"What does it matter what the rules are?" she whispered. "You'll be dead ... in three and a half hours you'll be dead."

"You were married to him. You'd know where Trent would run."

The woman shivered.

It ran through her, that shiver. An involuntary movement — something you'd expect from a drowning swimmer making a last grasp for the surface, Rand realized.

He touched the weapon with the fingertips of his left hand, ran his hand along its bronze flank, feeling the vibration of the inverter in its power supply.

He stood.

"Don't," the woman sobbed.

Rand saw crow's-feet at the corners of her eyes, he heard an ambulance echoing through the glass-and-steel arroyos of the city.

The scent of lilac petals came to him, sepals floating on the motionless green water of a Thames estuary — a foreign memory, a moment he'd never lived, from the mind of the donor whose body he happened at the moment to occupy.

What does it matter? said the voice inside his head. *Let her live.*

Trent's wife sobbed a name, a place.

Rand rose to his feet.

He turned and walked away.

At the elevator capsule that wrecked the rooftop's International Style monopitch profile, Rand stopped and closed his eyes.

"Get out of my way," he said. "I don't have time to fight you."

Too bad, mouthed the ghost inside his head.

Rand ripped the weapon free from its holster and placed it against his own throat.

"Try me," Rand shouted to the midnight wind. "I've been dead once, I can try for twice. How about you?"

For a moment Rand paused. He realized acutely the irrationality of his action ... like an epileptic confronted by a mirror, he felt abruptly embarrassed, confused. *Here I am talking to myself ... Threatening myself. Someone who saw me would think I'm insane. Am I insane?*

Then Rand felt fear like a cold wind with a part of his mind that was not his.

Richardson Rand closed his eyes for a moment in triumph. He put the weapon away and smacked the button beside the rooftop elevator, and seconds, precious seconds, whisked past on the midnight wind before the elevator doors rumbled wide.

Rain had washed away all his purposes but one.

Awnings swayed under the downpour, dripped, rattled like prisoners testing their chains.

Inside a neon-bright camera shop, a cashier looked up and saw Rand striding past the window. When she spotted the tattoo on his head a secret smile blossomed on her lips — the expectation of death. *Maybe he'll do it here*, she was hoping. *Maybe I'll get to watch.*

As he pushed between a pair of hookers, he pondered the question:

Why did Trent kill me?

Does it matter, whispered a voice inside his head.

Rand ignored the interruption.

He looked up, and exultation rose in him like a pipe organ chord echoing in Chartres cathedral.

The hotel that Trent's wife had named an hour ago was fifty feet away, across the street, and his quarry was inside ... waiting.

He thinks he's waiting for me, Rand said to himself. In fact he's waiting for the fellow with a scythe, and doesn't know it.

He smiled.

He crossed the street against traffic and two cars screeched, crashed.

Rand didn't bother to look.

A Latino popped out of a ruined Cadillac and yelled in Spanish.

The crowd of people behind Rand infiltrated the blocked lanes of traffic, breaking into capil-

lary groups of two and three between cars. *Cabron*, the Latino screamed at him.

Rand walked past him and raindrops sizzled into steam on the barrel of the weapon in his hand.

The people in the crowd turned, their eyes agleam, and the Latino's mouth emptied midcurse as he caught sight of the tattoo on Rand's forehead. And then the blue balefire of the weapon punched fear like a tent spike into his dark eyes.

A changing wind blew the sour stink of wet asphalt into Rand's face. The wind shifted again and whisked the reek of the crowd, the smell of their hunger into his nostrils.

Rand saw the crowd as though for the first time. He saw the lust in their eyes, the loose tremulous quaver of their lips.

Will he do the Mexican, they're thinking. *Will he do the Mexican here, in front of us, so we can watch?*

He stopped.

He made it the rest of the way across the street without looking back. Something happened to people in crowds. Rand realized for the first time that he didn't like it; that in fact being the catalyst of such emotions made him feel as though he has just french-kissed a leper.

At the top of the marble steps he found the hotel security door locked.

Rand levelled his weapon and the glass doors slagged down, sparkled into plasma.

Inside (instead of curses and panic) he was greeted with eager stares. The doorman laughed softly and continuously. A bellboy, seeing the weapon in Rand's hand, made short sharp sounds of pleasure, and the night clerk's chin jerked up as Rand strode past. The night clerk's eyes tracked him with a perspicacity Rand had previously observed only in very old men looking at pictures of young naked girls.

"Can I tell you which floor your prey is on, sir?" Prey.

Rand gripped the weapon. Its handle felt slick with perspiration. A sour taste burned his mouth, like a drop of aconite.

"Can I tell you which room, sir? You're a Hunter ... I can see the tattoo. You *must* be a Hunter."

Rand heard himself speak the name of the man who had killed him, and for a moment he closed his eyes and he was back in the alley.

Rand had simply dropped his umbrella during a rainstorm.

He had dropped his umbrella and run cattycorner to huddle under a dripping fire escape while he struggled to force the umbrella open.

A splash:

The crunch of footsteps on wet asphalt ...

A flashbulb-burst of lightning ...

And Rand saw Addison Trent, one of his oldest friends, levelling a .357 magnum Smith & Wesson revolver at the precise center of his forehead.

Rand stared into the hollow black circle that was the end of his life on Earth, and then the back of his head exploded across the alley and the delicate tissue of whereases and heretofores and aforementioneds that was Richardson Ryan Rand, Esquire, leaked away into the wet oil-rainbowed pavement.

"Room Twenty-Four, sir. Sixth floor ... the bridal suite."

Rand opened his eyes.

"Your Prey. That's where your Prey is staying. ... Sir?"

Rand turned from the feral night clerk and made it to the elevator without gagging, slammed the button marked 6.

On the way up he gasped for air like a man who'd just run a marathon.

I won't let you do this, whispered the voice inside his head.

"Who the hell are you," Rand shouted in the empty elevator, "to tell me what I can do?"

The elevator door rolled open.

Rand didn't move.

He felt numb, assaulted by fragments of memory that displaced his own thoughts as effortlessly as ice cubes displace water.

He clapped his hands to his head.

He stumbled from the elevator, glossolalia brimming on his lips. Part of his mind was aware of the picture he made in the empty hotel corridor, and it was this part of his mind that observed him with an impartial contempt.

He wondered whether it was simply the *I* that he talked to when he talked to himself, or whether it was the ghost inside his head, the donor whose body he'd borrowed for four hours.

Rand leaned against the wall of the hotel corridor and banged his head with his fist.

Room Twenty-Six.

He realized he was facing the door of room Twenty-Six.

The weapon raised itself, quite as though it were controlling his hand, and then it fired.

The door of room Twenty-Six blew apart, and time slowed down. Rand leaped across flaming wood and molten metal into the burning bridal suite.

Trent crawled across the floor, coughing.

Before he could raise his weapon, Rand kicked it out of his hand. It all happened so slowly ... Time downshifted into first gear, an endless lacuna between the batter of Trent's weapon against the wall and the moment when the man looked up at him.

Trent laughed, coughing from the thick acrid

smoke.

"Do you really think," he choked, "they'll appreciate it?"

Rand pointed his weapon at the man's forehead. He had never realized until now how old Trent was: gray hairs silvered the man's temples, and the skin around his jowls hung flabby and creased like the pouch at a fowl's neck.

Trent was now on one knee.

"All those people ..." Trent wiped his sooty forehead with the sleeve of his tuxedo and tried to get up, but his knees were too shaky. "Hoping for a taste of blood — waiting in the lobby to catch a whiff of a burning corpse ..."

Trent gagged, wracked momentarily by a fit of coughing. "Come on, be a good marionette. Give 'em the show they're looking for."

Rand stepped back.

Anger. Maybe that's all he had left in the end ... Anger was perhaps the final grace, the one benediction remaining to him.

He raised the weapon, and its blue pulsing light sent stroboscopic shadows across the flame-lit hotel room.

"Tell me why, you son of a bitch."

"Go to hell," Trent coughed.

"Tell me WHY!"

Trent laughed, and the stinging smoke that filled the hotel room forced a trickle of tears down his cheeks.

The weapon shook in Rand's hand as he curled his finger round the trigger. *I won't let you do this* whispered the voice inside his head.

Who appointed you to tell me what I can and can't do? Rand shouted silently to someone who wasn't there. I'm DYING, you stupid prick.

So am I.

Rand blinked.

His free hand ran through his hair as though to pluck out the flood of images, memories, summer nights and autumn days that roared through his skull.

I've got leukemia, the voice inside his head whispered relentlessly. *I'm going to die in two months. I have to cram fifty years of living into the six weeks before I have to go into the hospital, so I've become a donor for Hunters. During the four hours they track their prey, I live their dreams, feel the wind on their faces and taste the fear in their mouths.*

Rand tried to swallow. But his throat was dry.

Go ahead. Kill me. But I won't let you do this.

Rand laughed, and tears ran down his chin.

He hurled the weapon out the shattered window and watched it spin out into the night, occulting momentarily a point or two of the Euclidean grid of light that was nighttime Los Angeles.

"You were my friend," he said to Trent.

"I wanted your wife." His hands were clasped; they seemed like small animals, abstracted from the man himself. "We planned it together ..."

Trent looked up at him, and suddenly Rand was frightened by the sense of age and emptiness in the man's face.

"When I killed you, I went to your home and she was gone. She wanted your money. Not me ..."

Trent covered his face with his hands. "Why not end it."

Rand looked at the matte black .357 that lay on the bed beside Trent.

That was why his quarry had waited here ...

He turned.

Rand stepped over the smouldering embers of the door and into the hotel corridor. *Where are you going?* mouthed the ghost inside his head.

"I have ..." He checked his Rolex. "... an hour and ten minutes. I want to breathe the air while I still can ... feel the rain."

Colin, the voice inside his head whispered during the elevator ride to the lobby. *Call me Colin.*

I wonder, Rand thought. I wonder if it's enough time ...

Intimations whirled in with the night wind; omens rode the air, portents, prefigurings. A flood of memories riptided through him, two minds open to each at last — mulled wine, gold candlelight, the wild cliffs at Devon whose heather smelled of sage and bracken and the sea.

So this is who you are, all at once, amazed, bereft, a letting-down, a letting-go; there was no time, no time left at all to explore the shared landscape of two remembered lives ...

An hour and ten minutes.

Not nearly enough time.

Or was it?

The elevator doors rumbled open. Rand passed through the lobby and through the slagged-down glass security doors and down into the street. The stench of smoke and soot and sweat was wiped away by the sound of leaves skittering across dark pavement, by the taste of the clear cold wind. ❑

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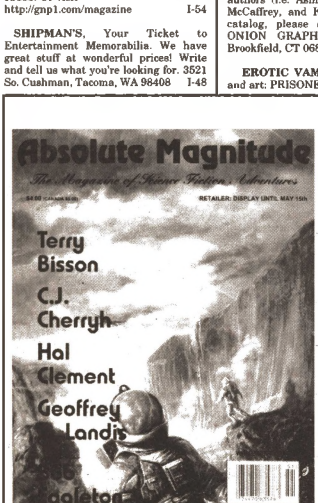

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De Rerum

By Eliot Fintushel

Art by Clyde Duensing, III

Ylem ... ! ... It's a word they use for the pudding at the universe's GO! (Do not collect $200.) I was there. You were there too, along with hippopotami and Uncle Joe, all mixed up together, as the poet says, "*discordia semina rerum*." You couldn't slide a feeler gauge twixt one thing and another. My fanny was your jawbone, and your whimsy was the Duke of Earl or a sunrise on Oahu. There wasn't any time yet in the *ylem*. (Did I say "yet?") The Laws of Nature weren't even out of the oven — step softly or they'll fall in!

That's where I was headed, straight into the soup, if the old man had his way.

I'm Beryl Molson, Chrononavigator for the Vooshkupf Corporation's flagship *Dog*; we name all our time-faring vessels after extinct animals. I'm just trying as hard as I can not to have one named after *me*.

"You've got to do this for me, Beryl," the old man said. Lionel Vooshkupf XVIII pushed up the cover of his dooby duct, a spring-hinged chrome plate on the wall at his back. The tube telescoped out, and he took a long, nervous suck. Some of the smoke escaped, and the smell made me giddy.

"I've heard a lot of hooey in my day, boss," I told him, "but this takes the cake. You want me to go back before the Big Bang?"

"That's right. You've got to. It's the only way to save the company." Old Lionel had the frame of an ox, with shoulders as wide as the Crab Nebula and hands that could throttle two at a time. He had a million-dollar mug too (as they used to say back when that was real money), high jawbones, a broad forehead, and luminous, blue-grey eyes under a mophead of silver hair. And the threads, well — he was wearing more money than the rest of the planet could borrow.

It was in the guy's chest, somehow, that it all fell down. He was caved in, beaten — you could tell that right off, and so could the sharks in the interplan cartels.

"Suppose I do what you want. Suppose we take the *Dog* down into the *ylem* and rearrange things so that, fifteen or twenty billion years down the line, you get your contract and we all keep our jobs. Who knows what else will be screwed up along with it?"

"That's all worked out. The R&D boys are on top of this one, believe me ..." — I didn't — "... and if you follow the plan, we'll all be winners, Beryl. But you have to back into that first microsecond. It's the only way."

"OK," I said, "but Topsy comes with me."

Vooshkupf winced. "I don't know if I feel comfortable with that idea."

Just then the room started stretching and shaking like a belly dancer in a funhouse mirror. I could see through the window behind Vooshkupf's head that the whole city skyline was dancing along. It didn't last long, but when the bumps and grinds were over, something felt very different. The distant sky was filled with Zeppelins. Somehow I was aware that my salary had been cut in half. The dooby duct was crammed with chalk dust. And Mr. V's suit was polyester. He frowned at his terminal screen and brought up some columns of figures.

"You see that?" he shouted. "You see that?" He stood up, enraged, but quickly sat down again when he realized that one pants leg was now missing from mid-thigh down. "They just did it again. They went back there and screwed around the primordial chemistry. The abundance of helium has changed, and they're right in there taking advantage. Our market share is down thirty points!"

Vooshkupf was slightly more handsome than he'd been a minute before — if you can call that a minute — but he was in a much weaker bargaining position. "Take Topsy," he said. "Take Rin Tin Tin. I don't give a damn. Just do it."

"Who's Rin Tin Tin?" I said.

"Look it up," he fumed.

I turned to leave, but the door I had entered through wasn't there any more. In fact, doors were no longer in use. I pushed out through a glowing, gelatinous membrane. I tried to give a brusque "Goodbye," as I exited through the gel, but my voice came out in a nasal contralto.

Helium, huh?

So how was I to know that Rin Tin Tin was the name of a timeship? As the poet says, "*Scio istarum rerum nihil*"; I don't know from nothing. I turned off my *Gantzavelt Encyclopedia*, the big one, and started in on Topsy again. The intractable female, inky-skinned, even to the gums and eyes, was still leaning on her elbows on the bubble-domed porch of my *pension*.

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As always, she was listening between the stations on her antique radio, the only thing she owned besides her trousers. Topsy was listening to static, in other words, which she referred to as "relic background radiation." It reminded her of home. As for me, *scio istarum rerum nihil.*

"Will you turn it off?" I said. "It's static."

"Three degrees Kelvin," she said, "and it's everywhere! All around us, in us and out of us. Somewhere in that static is where I came from." Topsy, like the current high ratio of helium to hydrogen and my boss's truncated pants leg, was a sudden consequence of someone's meddling with prehistory. She had appeared one day, fully grown, like Athena from Zeus's noddle, and with a brain full of memories that did not refer. She was a chrono-anomaly, a time freak, an orphan of history. "I want to go home, Beryl," she said.

"Good news!" I said. "That's exactly where we're going."

She turned off the radio. "You're taking me back!"

"We're going all the way up God's privates," I said, "right up the cosmic Fallopians, smack into the *primum ovum*. You're gonna meet your mommy, old Tops."

She sprang to her feet and kissed me. I always tried to discourage that — not knowing, what, if anything, was really betwixt her ant- and posterior — but it seemed appropriate at the moment. And I certainly liked it.

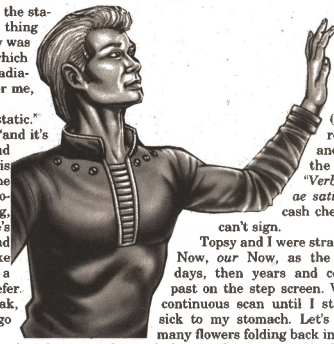
"I can help you navigate," she said. "I know the way. I know the tides of gravity. I know the Causal Ravines we can slide through, practically to the *ylem* itself. We can slip between the threads of events, man. We can sneak right up to the eve of Being. No Law of Nature will ever see us. I'm going home, Beryl! I love you!"

"Sure thing, Topsy!" — taking a little *lebensraum* with a discrete backstep — "as the poet says, *'Tecto et domo invitaris.'* There's no place like home!"

The wrench and micrometer boys had the timeship juiced, lubed and ready, in spite of the helium situation. Their spit and polish even extended to the brass registration plate under my control panel:

"A-1001 — RIN TIN TIN."

We had just taken off, and the count-up to ignition was about to begin — God, I hate timeshipping! I just hoped to hell that the *Rinny* would keep us in the moment. Once, on a routine ancestor switch — Vooshkupf wanted a little more blue blood — the *Gerbil* had sprung a leak.



I was picking slivers of the seventeenth century out of my butt for the next (last? concurrent?) week and a half. As the poet says, *"Verbum sapientiae satis est!"* Don't cash checks that you can't sign.

Topsy and I were strapped into the Now, *our* Now, as the hours, then days, then years and centuries slid past on the step screen. We had it on continuous scan until I started to feel sick to my stomach. Let's face it: how many flowers folding back into the cotyledon and glasses of water going back up into the pitcher can you take? *"Deridiculum est, quaqua, omnibus,"* don't you agree?

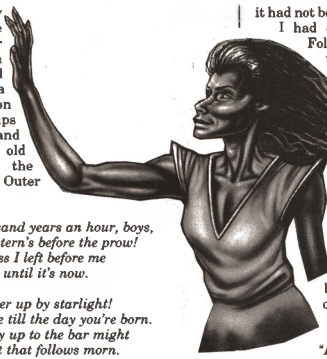
So Topsy switched it over to step-wise. That way we could watch things go in normal sequence within each phase, only with the phases going backwards, like ourselves. Once we got going, Tops set the phase length to two or three hundred million years, give or take, and we got to see the dinosaurs hopping from continent to continent as they split and drifted — always a big favorite! — followed by the formation of mountains, then the crazy kaleidoscope of ferns and bracken evolving, twisting and piling across the screen in layered patterns like autumn leaves on a skylight.

In the next sequence I got to watch some remote ancestors wiggle and bump willy-nilly from the slime, by generations, onto dry land. I had hardly done laughing at the oafish indirection through whose mass effect I sit here pretty, when the screen winked to the next (previous, actually) step sequence.

From there, it was all sticks and stones to me — though Topsy was just starting to show some interest — so we switched her back to continuous and watched meteors shoot out from the earth and planets scatter into small rocks, flitting through space like baby brine shrimp. Our solar nebula steamed away into fine diamond dust, and from there, for a good while, it was all geometry to me — *Scio istarum rerum nihil.*

We shut down the screen and coasted for a few billion years, occasionally checking the redshift of the surrounding matter to see when exactly we were; around ten to the third, things usually start to get interesting, but that was a few days away. We were still in the single digits.

I put my feet up on the dead monitor and sang a tune I'd learned as a deck hand on the timeships *Pterodactyl* and *Dodo*, an old shanty from the salad days of Outer Time travel:



It's a thousand years an hour, boys,
When the stern's before the prow!
And the lass I left before me
Won't wait until it's now.

So heave her up by starlight!
You'll slave till the day you're born.
Who'll belly up to the bar might
See a night that follows morn.

Jumped ship in the Cenozoic,
And stowed in the Pleistocene!
I know just where I'm bound, boys,
But I wonder where I've been.

So heave her up by starlight!
And don't forget to floss!
Your paycheck's in the mail, boys —
Back to the frigging boss.

Topsy was riding the dials and checking them against her charts. She had found us a Grand Canyon of a causal ravine to slide down. It was a disjunction that dated all the way back to pretime. At every moment along our way, the distance between the events to the right of us and those to the left was greater than the distance light could travel before the ravine widened even further; we were shimmying between event horizons, just as Topsy had promised.

After a couple days of highway bingo — Topsy always cheated, claiming to have spotted galaxy clusters a millenium or so before they had formed — we hit our first mark: a Bok globule, a cold, dark cloud shaped like a fat Buddha, about to squeeze out proto-stars. I switched on the starboard servomechanisms to deploy the beam projector with which Vooshkupf's techies had rigged old *Rinny*. Topsy and I watched it take aim at an exact spot in the globule, send out one small pulse, and then retract and fold back into the hull.

The phone rang. Topsy picked it up. "It's for you," she said.

I didn't know what to do with the thing at first; it had not been there a second earlier. Before that, I had only seen telephones in museums. Following Topsy's example, I pressed the thing against the side of my face and said, "Hello."

"Is that what you say?" Vooshkupf answered. It sounded like Vooshkupf, although I couldn't see him. "Hello! Well, so far, so good. We've got some communication now, so to speak. Actually, I said all this about nineteen billion years ago, but let that pass. If we're talking like this, that Bok ray must have worked pretty good, set up a causal sequence where you hear me say things then that I want to have meant now — my now — though why it has to be by goddamn telephone beats the hell out of me."

"It *is* a Princess," I told Vooshkupf, or something like him.

"A what?" he said.

"A Princess. It says so on the bottom. In cursive. And it's pink."

"Charming. Now listen up, Beryl. Are you opaque yet?"

I checked the Doppler gauge — redshift ninety-nine thousand. "Almost," I said. "Decoupling is just about to have not yet taken place. The energy is sliding back into mass. Wait a minute, I mean, one of *our* minutes." I flipped on the step screen. It was like watching rock candy form in a glass pot. Pretty soon — *our* soon — the screen was dark with it, and there was no point in looking further.

Topsy shot out some causal dye as our ravine narrowed going back toward the Big Bang. We didn't want to carom off some unremembered event wall into God-knows-what convoluted future.

"OK," I said. "We're opaque. We're maybe eleven thousand years from the big one."

"Right. It won't be long now before nucleosynthesis. That's where those bastards mixed up the helium ratios and changed my suit to goddamned polyester. We're going to beat their pants off, Beryl. Just leave everything alone till you get into the *ylem*, got it?"

"That's the plan, boss."

"Let's just hope we will have had this conversation once you're done. You're doing great. You're looking good. How's Topsy? Any trouble?"

"Naw, no problem. She cheats at highway bingo, though."

"Right. Listen. She can't really stay there in the *ylem*. You know that, don't you?"

"She can't?"

"No. You have to take her back with you."

"I do?"

"It would screw everything up, Beryl. We couldn't work it out."

"Holy cow!"

"I've got to hang up now. Is that what you say — hang up?"

"I think so."

"Good luck." I heard a click and then a humming sound.

"What did he tell you?" Topsy wanted to know.

"*Sunt lacrimae rerum*," I said.

"I wish you wouldn't do that," Topsy said. "It's a dead language."

"Not for another nineteen billion years, it's not. It's Vergil: 'Things cry.'"

"What things?" *Rinny* was bucking and vibrating as we hurtled through nucleosynthesis into the annihilation of primordial particle pairs. Electrons and positrons, then protons and anti-protons were wiping each other out. We were back into very small fractions of the first second post-Bang. I handed the pink Princess back to Topsy.

"You can't stay," I said. "The boss says it would screw things up. He wants you to come back with me."

"But I'm nearly home!" She dropped the Princess and grabbed my shoulders, pushing her jet black face into mine, breathing black breath against me. "You can't do this to me. Not now. Look, Beryl, when we get to the *ylem*, he's not your boss any more. Nobody can tell you what to do. Nothing exists then the way it will.

"All you do is slide open the inner bay door. I walk out into the detemporizing chamber. You close the door. You open the hull door by remote. That's it. I'm gone. Vooshkupf's wrong. It won't affect anything. I was never born in the first place, see? *Discordia semina rerum*, that's all I'll ever have been!"

"Ovid, huh? Wild seeds. Read me the Doppler."

"Ten to the thirty-second power. Particle creation. Almost off the scale. What are you going to do?"

The vibration was getting pretty bad. Along with the rattling and buzzing at a dozen different frequencies, there began to be loud blasts of white noise coming from everywhere at once. I looked at Topsy. Suddenly, hearing that sound, she had forgotten all about me and Vooshkupf. There was a blissful expression on her face. That static was Topsy's lullaby, her telegram from home.

Then it stopped. We were in a dead calm. The meter readings were garbage. Topsy squeezed my hand.

"Please, Beryl," she said, and she kissed me. Vooshkupf couldn't kiss like that.

I opened the inner bay door. *Amor vincit omnia*. She walked out, and I closed it. I opened the the hull door, waited a second, then closed it again. Topsy was gone. She had never been there in the first place.

I was starting to deploy Vooshkupf's gizmo when that brass registration plate crossed my eye:

"A-1001 — MAN."

The phone was ringing, but I wasn't sure I wanted to answer it. *Scio istarum rerum nihil*.

I opened the inner bay door and stepped into the detemporizing chamber. I closed the inner bay door. I opened the hull door and said hello to Topsy. She was everywhere, but then, so am I — As the poet says, "*E pluribus unum!*" — hippopotami, Uncle Joe, and you. ❑

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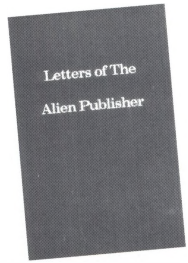

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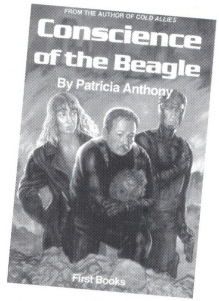

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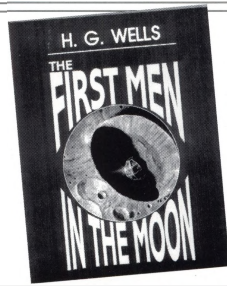

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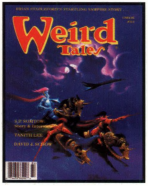

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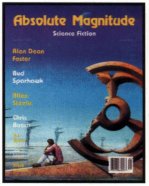

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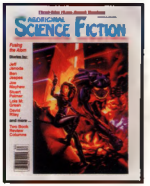

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